Blogs On Dark Age Britain And Ireland From The Anxious Bench

Philip Jenkins

A LOST CHRISTIAN WORLD

January 14, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I have a long-standing interest in the early church and the church of Late Antiquity – depending where you are located, that includes the era we sometimes call the Dark Ages. This fascination, for instance, led me to write books like my *Jesus Wars*. The more I think about it, the more I realize just where this interest comes from. Little did I realize it at the time, but I grew up in a landscape utterly marked by the early church, and an ancient kind of Christianity.

I come from South Wales, from a town called Port Talbot. Welsh people have always been great migrants. They love to relocate to distant parts of the world, where they write moving memoirs of how wonderful it is to live in Wales. Often, these accounts describe an industrial world, of mines and steelworks, and that was exactly the landscape I knew – up to the 1980s, Port Talbot was home to one of Europe's largest steelmaking complexes.

Beneath that world, though, an older realm lay, although most of us growing up in that era knew virtually nothing of it. A critical clue came from the steelworks itself, which was named the Abbey. It commemorated a rich twelfth century Cistercian abbey at nearby Margam, a vast local landholder. As with all the monasteries, Margam was annexed by local landowners at the Reformation, and most of the buildings perished. What survived was a few fragments, including the really beautiful abbey church.

A little digging, though, took us much further into the past. Margam also houses a precious Stones Museum holding the dozens of Christian memorial stones found at or near the site. Ranging from the fifth century through the eleventh, these showed just how active the settlement had been in the area through the darkest of Dark Ages. *Wikipedia* calls it "one of the most important collections of Celtic stone crosses in Britain." The site showed beyond any reasonable doubt that Margam itself housed a much older monastery from Celtic times, probably from the sixth century and perhaps long before.

While it is very difficult to reconstruct the history of this region in any detail, we know that sixth and seventh century Wales had surprisingly good contacts with the Mediterranean world, demonstrated by the presence of high-quality pottery, and the use of Continental and Byzantine styles in memorial inscriptions. Near Margam, remarkably, we even find a seventh century copper coin from Byzantine Alexandria.

But Margam was only a small part of a much larger Celtic Christian landscape. The town stands on a highly developed coastal stretch between the towns of Neath and Bridgend, a distance of twenty miles now spanned quickly by the M4 motorway. Incidentally, this motorway follows fairly closely the old Roman road from Cardiff to Carmarthen, which presumably mapped the original spread of Christianity in the fourth century. (Welsh names beginning with *Caer-* usually recall Roman memories, from the word *castra*, fortress). The Roman road was still functioning when the first Christian settlements were established.

Neath itself was a Roman fort, and had its own Cistercian abbey. Moving south, Baglan was another old Celtic church with its ancient stones. Still in my time, you could see the remnants of the twelfth century church that lay behind the handsome Victorian replacement. Later traditions take the settlement back to a sixth century missionary saint.

A few more miles brought you to Margam – but that raised an interesting question. Why was Margam there in the first place? Throughout Britain and Ireland, we see a common pattern in the placement of ancient churches and monastic settlements, which usually lay conveniently close to centers of royal power. Missionaries and church leaders wanted to be close enough to the kings and chieftains to take advantage of their protection, and to influence affairs, but not so close as to fall under their total control. Often, over time, the church survived as a powerful center, while the older royal seat decayed or vanished. A great church like Margam must have followed some pattern like this, but where was the original "palace" or royal villa, the warlord's hall (*llys*)?

Almost certainly, the royal settlement was at a village called Kenfig, an amazing example of continuity from Roman times through the Middle Ages. It became the site of a thriving medieval borough, before it disappeared entirely under shifting sand dunes. For centuries now, it has been literally a lost city, "The Buried City of Kenfig." Kenfig may have been the capital of a *cantref*, an early Welsh political unit that would have run between the rivers Tawe and Ogwr/Ogmore. (In an earlier life, back in 1988, I actually wrote an article on this region in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*!) From perhaps 500 through 1050, the region I am discussing would thus have been the cantref of Margam, with its royal center at Kenfig and its principal church at Margam proper.

The lovely Kenfig area also has the village and church of Mawdlam, named from the church of Mary Magdalene. With Kenfig, it's a legendary beauty spot: in fact, part of "the largest active sand dune system in Europe." Cornelly nearby recalls a church of St. Cornelius.

Near Kenfig we find the site of the hermitage of Theodoric. Accurately or not, this is believed to be the monastic site where a local king retired after resigning his crown, somewhere around 600. Bringing very different worlds together, this king in south Wales bore a Germanic or Gothic name, and he named his own son Maurice, after the reigning Byzantine Emperor of the day.

Near Bridgend, old Christian settlements abound (and there was also a Roman station somewhere nearby). Ewenni has its twelfth century Benedictine priory, but as at Margam, this was built over much older foundations.

Nearby is Merthyr Mawr, an evocative name. "Merthyr" is a well known Welsh place-name, which derives from *martyrium*, a site of martyrdom. This did not necessarily imply violent death or persecution, but rather a remote place where monks and hermits dedicated their lives in absolute devotion to God, renouncing all. Merthyr Mawr is thus the Great Martyrium. We know from land charters that Celtic bishops were developing their landed estates in the Ewenni-Merthyr Mawr area at least from around 700, and Merthyr Mawr also has a rich crop of early Christian memorial stones. However little survives to see today, once this must have been a flourishing settlement.

Many Welsh place-names include the element Llan-, and these are found throughout the area. A *llan-* is an enclosure, marking an old Celtic church or monastery, as in Llanfihangel, Church of the Angels. Once you move a little east of Bridgend, you find some of the most important Celtic

monasteries in the whole British Isles. This area, the Vale of Glamorgan, had in its day been the most Romanized area of Wales, with a concentration of villas, and some of those presumably converted directly to become monasteries or churches. Llantwit Major and Llancarfan were the centers for the influential early saints Illtyd and Cadoc.

Llandough near Cardiff may have been quite as important in its day, and has produced some remarkable archaeological finds in recent years. In fact, the early monastery here seems to have grown directly out an older Roman villa settlement, suggesting Christian continuity through the fifth century.

Just think of that concentration – a major Celtic monastery every eight or ten miles or so, and I've only begun to sketch the area.

As a child, even as a teenager, I knew next to nothing of any of this. I don't think I even visited the Margam Stones Museum until I was seventeen or so. Since then, though, I have been fascinated with that whole lost Christian world, especially its Celtic dimensions.

I've spent the rest of my life making up for that lost time.

WHY MONKS MATTER

January 28, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
6 Comments

I have recently been posting about the end of the church in Roman Britain, mainly as a case study in how churches die. Just to recap, the old church disintegrated after 450 or so, at least in the south and east of the island – that is, southern and Eastern England – but it survived and flourished in the north and west: in Wales, the West Country, and Northwest Britain. When we look at the survival of the faith in extreme conditions of violence and chaos, when institutions are on the verge of collapse, there is one major factor that perhaps we underestimate, and that is monasticism.

Today, Protestants might assume that the best way of ensuring continuity of faith would be access to scriptures, but at least in the so-called Dark Ages, it is the monasteries and convents that really demand our attention. Across the Eastern world, it was the monks who seized the imagination and respect of outsiders, including Muhammad himself. Rightly or wrongly, they saw the monks and nuns and their houses as the heart of the Christian faith.

In the East, monasticism originated in the third century, and was booming during the fourth. The movement was slower to take hold in the West, where the key figure was the very influential bishop St. Martin of Tours (316-397). Martin developed a monastery at Marmoutier (*Majus Monasterium*), which spread the monastic vogue in Gaul and the West. In 410, another key house was founded at Lérins.

By the time that Roman rule ended in Britain in 410, then, monasticism was a new vogue, and it probably made only slow progress in the island before the old Roman Christian society collapsed in

the mid-fifth century. Very shortly after that time, though, evidence for British monasticism surges. Of course, it is difficult to know exactly what to make of later medieval saints' lives, which portray their heroes as abbots and monks in the familiar medieval mode, back projected to implausibly early eras. But we have plenty of strictly contemporary early material, from the fifth and sixth centuries.

Partly, this evidence is archaeological, with early sites throughout western Britain and Wales, notably Tintagel in Cornwall. But we also have well dated literary texts. Around 475, for instance, the Gaulish bishop Sidonius Apollinaris describes his meeting with a Briton named Riochatus "priest and monk [*antistes ac monachus*], and thus twice a stranger and pilgrim in this world." In the 540s, monks feature repeatedly in the writings of the British writer Gildas, who denounces the kings of his time in the west and south-west. Maglocunus, for instance, a powerful Welsh ruler, had in the past renounced his secular authority for a monastery, and taken vows – although he later violated them. Another British king, Constantine, apparently disguised himself as an abbot in order to assassinate two rival princes.

Although not strictly contemporary, the historian Bede (writing 731) had excellent sources about his native Northumbria. We should therefore believe him when he tells us that around 600, the pagan king Aethelfrith slaughtered several hundred monks from the north Wales abbey of Bangor, who had massed to support British forces in a battle at Chester.

Monks and monasteries, it seems, had become familiar parts of the social and religious landscape. During the sixth century we find the origins of many critically important British religious houses, which were widely imitated in the nascent Irish church.

So why did these monastic houses matter so much? From a modern point of view, they were so important because of their literary and cultural works, as they wrote and copied so much of what became our indispensable historical sources for a very dark era. From a contemporary perspective, though, their importance was very different.

Partly, monasteries were crucial centers of evangelism. They spread the faith into the countryside, breaking the old assumption that Christianity was an urban faith. Monasteries were often located far from the centers of civilized life and authority, in areas where the church would scarcely have penetrated otherwise. That work became all the more important as the ancient cities and trade routes declined, and the centers of wealth and power moved into the old country areas.

In the spiritual context of the time, moreover, monks and solitaries of various kinds offered heroic role models. Their austere lives proved their obvious holiness, and made them champions against the forces of evil believed to dominate the world. Monasteries and hermitages were God's fortresses in the wilderness, bases of operations for constant spiritual warfare. Monks epitomized the Christian ideal, giving them a status that potentially rose above that of the secular world. Even a great king like Maglocunus dreamed that he might aspire so high, although he ultimately fell short.

That fortress analogy would prove literally correct during times of chaos, when cities fell. But the monasteries remained, and retained the loyalty of ordinary believers of all classes. We see this most clearly in the Middle East, where ancient Christian monasteries carried on for centuries after Islam had come to dominate the surrounding regions. Even aggressive barbarians often thought twice

before molesting such radiant centers of spiritual charisma. (As Aethelfrith's story tells us, though, monks could only retain this protected status if they steered well clear of overt political involvement)

So there is my answer for why Christianity died in the south and east of Roman Britain. The church's institutional structures in those areas dissolved about fifty years too early, before a monastic movement could have established an alternative framework for faith, one better suited to the bloody and confused times that lay ahead.

At a time when Christian society was falling into ruins, then, the faith survived through the work of intimate communities devoted to maintaining its values and beliefs at the most fundamental level. I stress that this is a matter of distant history, and has no relevance at all to modern conditions.

WHEN CHURCHES VANISH

January 4, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
7 Comments

So much of Christian history is about the planting and rise of communities, a saga of creators and builders. On occasion, though, churches are destroyed, to the point that Christianity is eliminated entirely in particular regions. Alternatively, it is reduced to a miserable handful of clandestine believers faced with the daily danger of persecution and death. This is what happened, for instance, in North Africa or Nubia following the Muslim conquest; in much of the Middle East or China in the late Middle Ages; and in Japan in the seventeenth century. In my book The Lost History of Christianity, I raised the obvious the question of how Christians can possibly place these calamities in a theological dimension. Why did (and does) God permit his churches to be destroyed?

Looking at the remains of these lost churches is always evocative, sometimes heart-breaking, and we don't need to travel to Iraq or the Sudan to do so. I grew up in Great Britain, which still notionally claims the status of a Christian country, with a church dating back many centuries. Underlying the churches we know, though, there was another church, and indeed a Christian nation, that was uprooted and all but destroyed.

Christianity probably came to the land we now call England in the second or third centuries, when it was part of the Roman Empire. By the third century, a Christian called Alban was martyred at the city later known as St. Alban's, which became a noted center of pilgrimage. When the Roman Empire tolerated Christianity, there would have been a whole diocesan structure with perhaps twenty bishops and, surely, some monasteries. Three British bishops appear at the Council of Arles in 314, perhaps representing London, York and Lincoln.

By the fifth century, British Christianity was confident and complex enough to produce its own heresy in the form of Pelagianism, a special bugbear of Augustine of Hippo. The church presumably survived and flourished in southern and eastern England at least through the mid-fifth century. (It lasted a lot longer in the poorer lands of the far north and west, and in Wales, but that is another story). By that point – by 450, say – the church had at least two hundred years of organic development behind it.

And then catastrophe befell. Accumulating barbarian attacks reached a critical new stage in the 430s and 440s, as pagan Anglo-Saxon mercenaries rebelled. The ensuing war utterly smashed the cities and towns that had been the centers of civilized life, and the barbarians slaughtered or enslaved the inhabitants. A hundred years later, the monk Gildas recorded the scenes: *All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants–church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press.* Unburied bodies littered the streets.

Some surviving Christians fled north or west to the lands that still resisted the invaders, or to a new colony in Brittany. Others remained as slaves or as members of an underclass, possibly living in a kind of apartheid system under the ruling Anglo-Saxons. By 450 – roughly the time of the Council of Chalcedon – Roman/urban/Christian civilization was ceasing to exist across what had been the most advanced and civilized regions of the island of Britain. At some point in the fifth century, there must have been men who were the last Roman bishops of London and Lincoln, Leicester and Winchester, although we can never know their names or their fates. Perhaps one died in a ditch, one as a refugee, the others as slaves: we will never know.

Although it is only a guess, many of the native British families who had been Christian in 400 or so simply lost their faith, with no access to clergy. I say "guess" because nobody remained to write their history. In stark contrast to France or Spain, the Latin of the native British church entirely vanished. Nor did the Celtic language of the once-Christian survivors make any significant contribution to the Germanic language of the new country: we speak English.

When a new Roman-inspired mission arrived in 597, under St. Augustine of Canterbury, he reported finding virtually no Christian presence in the south or east of England, although he still had to confront cantankerous Welsh bishops to the far west. Even in London, we see no signs of survival. A once-flourishing church evaporated, and there are very few obvious bridges between the old order and the new.

Christian England was built on the abject ruins of a lost Christian Britain. So what is a Christian to make of that fact? We could be optimists, suggesting that once God establishes his church, he will restore it even after it succumbs to worldly defeats. But another interpretation is possible, and more troubling. For whatever reason, perhaps God does indeed allow a whole church not just to suffer but to be annihilated, and to be replaced by a whole new structure. New tenants succeed to the vineyard.

In Britain, then, as in Iraq or Nubia or Japan, historical experience raises theological issues that mesh poorly with the assumptions of most contemporary churches. For churches as for individuals, contemplating extinction can (and should) be a sobering exercise.

Now there's a different suggestion for beginning the new year …

DO LANGUAGES (AND FAITHS) VANISH WITHOUT TRACE?

January 18, 2013 by Philip Jenkins

I'm wrestling with a truly baffling linguistic mystery, with some far-reaching implications for Christian history.

In a couple of recent posts, I looked at the fate of the [British Christian](#) society that appears to have been [overwhelmed](#) by pagan Germanic invaders during the fifth and sixth centuries. According to traditional accounts, invaders killed or enslaved most of the earlier Celtic inhabitants in the south and east of England, driving many into exile to the north or west, or overseas. That's the story told by the author Gildas (around 540), and later literary accounts. The old British Christianity was wiped out. Britain (Roman, Celtic, Christian) was replaced by England (Germanic and, originally at least, pagan).

The problem – or rather the first of many problems – is that this story receives very little confirmation from archaeology. If you go by the archaeology alone, it's hard to see such sharp breaks. Roman cities and structures decay but are not obviously destroyed in any scale, and Germanic objects appear only gradually. It's almost as if the older society receives a smallish migration, and gradually adopts the culture of the newcomers. We even see occasional traces of churches possibly continuing through the darkest ages, at Canterbury, St. Alban's and elsewhere. If that's true, then most of England's later inhabitants are British/Celtic by origin, but adopting Germanic culture, dress, and, above all, language. It's an easy transition then, or so we are told, and it's disguised only by the ravings of fanatical Christians who invented a pseudo history for their own rhetorical purposes. That, or something like it, has in the last thirty years or so come to occupy orthodox status in the modern British historical world. The people continue, but their languages die utterly.

I don't believe it for an instant. Language, above all, seems an insuperable objection. The English language is very well studied, and in that language, including all its dialects, only about *thirty* words of Celtic origin have ever been identified ("crag" is the least obscure). Has there *ever* in human history ever been an example of a population moving from one language to another with virtually no survival of the original tongue, nothing of what linguists call "interference"? Nor, incidentally, is there a word of British Latin – all the early Latin loan-words come from later church sources. Of course, I am speaking of linguistic transitions in pre-industrial eras, before the enormous power of modern media.

I'm also discussing Celtic loan-words in spoken language, not in place-names. Celtic and Roman place-names survive in Britain in some number, eg for rivers like the Thames and Avon, but that's not surprising. Even when older populations are altogether driven out, their place names are often retained by the new conquerors, particularly for obvious physical features. In North America, for instance, look at countless names like the Narragansett or Aliquippa or Ohio, none of which imply a large surviving native population. Even in the colonial era, the British borrowed a sizable number of words from the peoples of its Indian Empire, although nobody has ever suggested that the white rulers represented anything more than a microscopic fraction of the subcontinent's population. Linguistic borrowing is a natural and common phenomenon – except, it seems, when the Anglo-Saxons conquered Britain.

The Anglo-Saxon spoken in England was as linguistically and grammatically pure a variant of the Germanic language as we find anywhere. As far as we can tell, we find no evidence whatever in Anglo-Saxon England of any minority population continuing to speak British, except for some legal references of the Welsh in the kingdom of Wessex shortly after it had annexed some Celtic territory. If in fact a linguistic transition occurred, it must have happened close to overnight – well, in at most a few generations.

Is that vaguely credible? Do we honestly have to imagine father coming from one day and telling his family, "Well, I've decided. We are going to become Germanic, and as of tomorrow, we must speak nothing but that language. So tell the kids, not a word more of this Celtic! We'll start by working on our strong verbs. Oh, and by the way, I'm changing my name from Claudius to Aethelfrith." *Really?* Is it not vastly more likely that British numbers were reduced massively, and the survivors reduced to such brutal slavery that their language had absolutely no impact on the new Germanic master race? Gildas, in short, would have been exactly right. If not literal genocide, then it was cultural annihilation.

By way of contrast, look what happened a few centuries later when the Normans conquered the Anglo-Saxons, and treated their language and culture with ruthless contempt. That phase began in 1066, and ended three or four hundred years later when English re-emerged in something like its modern form, with a heavily Anglo-Saxon structure, and many Norman loan-words. In other words, even then, the conquered language survived and ultimately was vindicated – a total contrast to the story we are looking at with the lost British tongue.

To put this in context, look at four major regions of the Western Roman Empire as it existed in the fourth century: Gaul, Spain, Italy and Britain. All to differing degrees fell under barbarian rule, and all experienced significant Germanic immigration. In three of the countries, Latin ultimately triumphed, in the form of the modern languages we now call French, Spanish and Italian, not to mention tongues like Portuguese, Catalan and Provençal. The glaring exception is Britain, which mainly speaks English, with Celtic outliers.

Why the difference? Partly it's a matter of who the barbarians actually were. The tribes who invaded mainland Western Europe had long contact with the Roman world, and had borrowed some of their ways and attitudes: the Anglo-Saxons had not.

Also, the native British/Roman people fought in a more determined way against the invaders, leading to some extraordinarily violent and destructive wars that peaked between 440 and, say, the 470s. Vastly aggravating the effects of warfare was severe and recurrent plague, likely accompanied by famine as economic structures collapsed. These disasters utterly destroyed the old urban structure, and with it, the Latin of Roman times. Latin-speaking elites were eliminated or fled, including, most significantly, the church. The British church that was quite well established in, say, 420, pretty much vanished without trace by the time Roman missionaries appear in the 590s. The diocesan structure was wholly uprooted, and an entire new structure put in its place. (Again, British bishops survived in the north and west).

Again, let's contrast Western Europe, where Latin survived as the language of the cities, however reduced those were, and of the bishops who effectively ruled them. *In Britain, in contrast, cities, bishops and Latin perished together.*

This meant that the Anglo-Saxons were not confronting Latin as the native language, but British Celtic. They were in a radically different position from the continental Franks or Goths, who confronted the prestigious Roman tongue of Latin with its enormous potential values for ambitious chieftains and would-be kings. However numerous the British Celtic survivors may have been, no self-respecting Anglo-Saxon ever bothered to learn a word of it. Well, maybe thirty words, but no more, not in half a millennium.

By the way, it's not just Gildas who refers to mass expulsions. Bede, for instance, whose Northumbrian sources were impeccable, refers to the king Ethelfrith c. 600: "For he conquered more territories from the Britons, either making them tributary, or driving the inhabitants clean out, and planting English in their places, than any other king or tribune." That's an explicit reference to ethnic cleansing. In the 670s, we hear of the Northumbrian churchman Wilfrid being granted lands that had been confiscated from British congregations.

One more point to complicate matters. Just when I have decided that story of Britons adopting the language voluntarily is ludicrous, we then find the curious story of [Caedmon](), the very first known and named Anglo-Saxon poet, and the first English Christian poet. He lived around 680, and we still have a few of his lines. The problem is that this pioneer of English verse bears a name that is certainly Celtic or British. It is in fact the same name as Catamanus, a famous early Welsh king who would have died not long before Caedmon was born, and possibly the younger man was named after the elder. Can we really take this as evidence that already by 680 the British Celts had so mastered English that they produced one of its first literary masters?

So yes, I'm puzzled.

But the question goes far beyond language, and gets to religion. If in fact the British really did survive in any numbers, then that would have made the lives of later Christian missionaries much easier. Instead of introducing a faith, they would have been reminding people of what their grandparents used to do, and maybe even reusing some of the once sacred Christian sites.

THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN

January 11, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins]()
[0 Comments]()

I recently posted about [the annihilation of the church in Roman Britain](). Writing the history of that church is largely a story of reporting negatives – not something that historians like to do, but sometimes we have no choice. (Let me stress again that I'm talking about the wealthier south and east of the island, not the north, west, or Wales).

It is profoundly depressing to realize how pathetically little survives of all the Christian literature that must once have existed in Roman Britain: not a word of all the Bibles and liturgical books, all the controversial texts and letters, all the administrative correspondence and church records. Did some erudite Londoner c.420 sit down to write a dazzling multi-volume *History of British Christianity*? If so, we have not a trace of it. We do have excerpts from Pelagius, and of course the writings of Patrick,

the British boy who was enslaved by pagan Irish raiders and eventually sought to convert his new country. But the losses are enormous, and irretrievable.

From the whole fifth century, literally *one* British official record survives, and that is an appalling extract from a letter pleading for Roman intervention in 446. It reads: "The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea throws us back on the barbarians: thus two modes of death await us, we are either slain or drowned." That could serve as the epitaph of the dying church.

We actually do have some potent survivals of this old church, but each in its way is a monument of despair and desolation. Probably facing barbarian invasion in the late fourth century, a major local church in eastern England desperately hid its magnificent collection of silver liturgical goods, giving some hint as to how visually splendid British churches must already have been. Drawing analogies from the country's spectacular Roman villas, these churches and basilicas would have had magnificent mosaics, although nothing remains. But the fact that this [Water Newton treasure](#) was never reclaimed until its discovery in 1975 suggests that the church must have been wiped out.

Probably in the 410s, a super-rich family buried a vast hoard near [Hoxne](#) in Eastern England, some *sixty pounds* of gold and silver, including some clearly Christian items with telltale Chi-Rho symbols. Undoubtedly, they were part of Britain's Christian aristocracy, but they too failed to claim their treasure, showing that disaster overcame them.

At a guess, all the British Christian gold and silver that was not safely hidden ended up being melted down and turned into brooches and jewelry for Anglo-Saxon chieftains.

Only in a few cases do we see even vague hints of continuity. The clearest is at St. Alban's itself, which somehow retained Roman memories: perhaps the pilgrimage survived even through the worst years. The Romans called it *Verulamium*, the English called it *Verlamacestir*, or Verlam-fort. Still in the eighth century, the Northumbrian historian Bede had heard that this was the site of a church of wonderful workmanship. "In which place, there ceases not to this day the cure of sick persons, and the frequent working of wonders." Can we assume that old-established British believers were increasingly joined by newer Anglo-Saxon converts? Place names such as "Eccles" (Latin ecclesia) may mark an enduring church, but even those instances are rare in the south and east.

In his book [Christians and Pagans](#), Malcolm Lambert writes that whatever survived of the older Christianity "had no prestige within the lands of prime conquest: it was the religion of the defeated. Germanic [paganism](#) was the religion of the conquerors" (57).

Augustine of Canterbury also tells an odd story of meeting some people who venerated a certain Sixtus, but they had no idea whether he was a martyr, or, frankly, what this Christianity was all about. The Pope told Augustine to build a church on the site and dedicate it to a Roman Pope named Sixtus, thus obliterating the identity of one of the last British Christians whose name we know – perhaps a man once celebrated as a martyr for the faith.

It's a grim story, and one that must make us appreciate all the glories that do survive of historic Christian civilization elsewhere, despite all the wars and catastrophes.

BRITAIN, AFRICA, AND THE END OF ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

January 25, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
7 Comments

I have recently been discussing the destruction of the church that flourished in Roman Britain up through the fifth century. Historians differ greatly on how far they think the fifth and sixth centuries marked a major change of population in the country, or at least the south and east of the island – what became southern and eastern England. In my view, the old society really was devastated, and the best argument for that is the linguistic transformation. Neither Latin nor Celtic British shows the slightest signs of survival in these regions, which spoke Germanic Anglo-Saxon, and later English. If genocide in any modern sense was far beyond the technologies of the time, we are nevertheless thinking of harsh subjection.

I have been trying to find analogies to this situation elsewhere in the Roman world at the time, and I think one region in particular does offer important comparisons, namely North Africa. In particular, it does suggest how a religious structure and system could be utterly destroyed, without necessarily imagining a wholesale annihilation of populations. If any earlier scholar has ever compared the end of Roman Britain with that of Roman Africa, I am not aware of it – but the comparison is useful, especially for the critical role of *language* as a vehicle of religious belief.

To begin with the obvious point, Christianity was well established in Roman Britain by c.400, and it had a solid institutional structure. There were four metropolitans – at London, York, Lincoln and Cirencester – and perhaps twenty or more territorial bishops below them, based in the capitals of each *civitas*. Judging by the few material goods that survive, this church was wealthy, and it was intellectually lively enough to generate an influential heresy in Pelagianism. There were also substantial Christian landed elites.

Historians can argue at length about the nature of the transformation that occurred after the formal end of Roman rule. Perhaps the catastrophes described by some early authors weren't so bad as rumored; perhaps there was continuity in this town or that region; perhaps here and there we see ancient British people surviving. What we cannot deny, though, is that the old episcopal structure was definitely not in existence by the end of the sixth century.

Originally, when Pope Gregory the Great in the 590s sent his mission to Anglo-Saxon England under Augustine, he envisioned setting up something like the old imperial Roman structure, with metropolitans at London and York, each presiding over a dozen bishops. However, at no point did Augustine encounter any surviving bishops or episcopal structure in the south and east of the island. (They certainly flourished in Wales and the western parts). If Augustine had met or even heard of bishops in (say) London, Lincoln, Leicester, Canterbury, Winchester, Silchester or Colchester, he might not have enjoyed the encounter, but he assuredly would have mentioned them, as they would have played such an important part in Gregory's long-term scheme.

The lack of bishops in the south and east demands attention. Noting the low intensity of major Anglo-Saxon remains in some regions, scholars have suggested that enclaves of British population

might have continued fairly unmolested in some areas, including London, Lincoln, St. Alban's and the Chilterns. But if that was the case – and, more important, if these communities were still Christian – where were their bishops? When in 603 Augustine of Canterbury wanted to meet British bishops, he traveled to a conference at Aust near Bristol, a convenient gathering place for Wales and the West Country. He evidently did not hold a similar conference in London or Lincoln, presumably because there was nobody to meet there.

We are not dealing with some kind of Roman-orchestrated conspiracy of silence. British populations might have survived the onset of the Anglo-Saxons in fair numbers, and isolated Christian communities might have continued, but the institutional church – the episcopate – had perished. And that was critical, in a way that might not be appreciated by modern adherents of decentralized or non-hierarchical churches. In the context of early Christianity, the lack of bishops meant that the church itself had ceased to exist. Among other things, it meant the absence of any capacity to ordain clergy, and to maintain the liturgy.

By far the most likely date for the end of the old structure is the mid-late fifth century, following the wars and plagues that began in the 440s, and which may have continued for some decades. Although it is a guess, I suspect that the old roster of bishops and their sees would have ceased to function by, say, 470. At some point in this era, there would have been a cadre of men who would have been the last incumbents of their particular sees.

As I have written elsewhere, these crises would have meant that cities, bishops and the Latin language perished together. Britain's great sixth century Latin author was Gildas, who would have been born around 500, but we know that he learned his language as an academic subject in a school or monastery, not as a spoken vernacular. The obvious lesson is that British Latin must have been close to extinct by that point.

Very significantly, moreover, we see no effort by surviving Christians to erect any new kind of episcopal structure. Now, the fact that old Roman towns had faded away meant that it made little sense to try and restore an episcopate in fading centers like *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester) or *Venta Icenorum* (near Norwich). But if Christianity survived in southern and eastern England, why did surviving priests and laity not restore the episcopal structure, even if that meant sending envoys to Gaul or Spain for assistance? If they did make any such effort, it failed utterly because, as I have said, Augustine did not report finding bishops in the south and east. Either the surviving British in southern and eastern England were too poor and oppressed to contemplate any such effort; or else the faith no longer functioned.

For me, this lack of bishops is decisive evidence that Christianity no longer functioned in southern and eastern Britain by the late sixth century, or if it did, it was at the most rudimentary level, with vague memories of some shrines and martyr-sites, such as St. Alban's. What we have here is a classic example of the destruction of a church. The process would have taken around a century, from c.450 to c.550.

And that brings me to the experience of [Roman Africa](), the region that we would call Tunisia and coastal Algeria, where a thriving Christianity also ceased to exist. (I base the following on my 2008 book *[The Lost History of Christianity]()*).

In its day, the African church had been one of the wonders of the Christian world. Latin Christian traditions developed in Carthage rather than Rome, and Africa was the home of such great early leaders as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. By the late fifth century, North Africa had an astonishing five or six hundred bishoprics, while monasteries were a familiar part of the local social landscape. Even after long struggles between rival Christian sects, North Africa in the century after 560 was a potent center of spiritual, literary and cultural activity.

Yet within fifty years of the completion of the Arab conquest in 698, local Muslim rulers were apologizing to the Caliphs that they could no longer supply Christian slaves, since Christians were now so scarce. Most sequences of bishops end suddenly, and even in the few surviving sees, we find gaps of decades or centuries at a time. Long centuries of darkness are illuminated only briefly, as when a tenth century pope consecrated a new Archbishop of Carthage, but it is far from clear how many bishops survived within his province. And although isolated Christian communities of African Christians (*Afariqa*) do appear in the eleventh or twelfth centuries, there little evidence of a semi-tolerated Christian presence continuing little noticed, away in the boondocks. For all intents and purposes, though, North African Christianity had largely perished centuries before – mainly between 650 and 750.

African Latin also faded fast, and eventually disappeared as thoroughly as it did in England.

Some of the reasons that a modern observer might identify as causes of the African church's decline need not necessarily have been fatal. In the fifth and sixth centuries, African Christians had suffered appalling sectarian divisions between various groups, each denouncing the others as heretics. Orthodox Catholics faced puritanical Donatists, Vandal Arians, and insurgent peasant Circumcelliones, and dominant factions were not shy about enforcing their rule through blood and terror. Yet such a statement could equally well be made about most other regions of the late Roman world, including Syria and Mesopotamia, where some churches at least took the coming of Islam in their stride. Indeed, we might take the depth of partisanship as a measure of the passion that believers felt about their religion, making it all the more unlikely that they would renounce it overnight. And the Muslim conquerors had no interest whatever in persecuting Christians as such.

Where the African church failed was in not carrying Christianity beyond the Romanized inhabitants of the cities and the great estates, and not sinking roots into the world of the native peoples. Like most regions of the western empire, such as Gaul and Spain, Africa was divided between Latin-speaking provincials and old-stock natives, who spoke their ancient languages, in this case, varieties of Berber. Unlike these other provinces, though, the African church had made next to no progress in taking the faith to the villages and the neighboring tribes, and nor, critically, had they tried to evangelize in local languages. Evidence of the neglect of the countryside can be found in the letters of St. Augustine, by far the best known of African bishops, whose vision was sharply focused on the cities of Rome and Carthage, and he expressed little interest in the rural areas or peoples of his diocese. (In contrast, the Egyptian church did make such efforts, and it rode out the Arab conquest without too much difficulty).

If Africa's Christian elites had remained in place long enough, then ultimately their faith, and their language, would have permeated the cultures of the lower classes. But the lack of deep roots meant that Christianity was vulnerable to a sudden decapitation, which would remove the Christian upper classes while leaving no infrastructure. In that case, nothing would be left.

Christianity in this region remained as much a colonists' religion as it would be once again during the French empire of the twentieth century, and just as in that later period, when the colonists left, so did the religion. Long wars during the sixth and seventh centuries forced many Romanized Africans to flee to other parts of the Mediterranean, and the Arab conquest virtually completed this process. As a Victorian scholar noted, "the African churches were destroyed not because they were corrupt but because they failed to reach the hearts of the true natives of the province… They fell because they were the churches of a party and not of a people." Muslims did not have to eradicate African Christianity, because the believers had already fled.

I wonder whether similar remarks apply to Roman Britain, especially the point about decapitation. In the western regions, like Wales and Dumnonia (Devon and Cornwall) Christian kings and secular elites survived long enough for their faith to penetrate the lower orders, particularly through the influence of monasteries and local shrines. These parts therefore entered the early Middle Ages with a thoroughly rooted Christian culture – albeit with plenty of pagan survivals.

In southern and eastern Britain, though, the crises of the fifth century came at too early a stage, when the faith had not yet traveled far outside the cities and the villas, and when as yet monasticism was still at a very rudimentary stage. As W.H.C. Frend pointed out many years ago, the British church seems not to have developed a serious parochial structure – although it is always hard to argue from silence. Assume, though, that this view is correct.

With the head struck off, then, the church's roots withered quickly. Christianity would therefore have faded at roughly the same stage as British Latin, by the start of the sixth century

So yes, I do think the experiences of these two very distant parts of the Roman Empire do illuminate each other quite powerfully.

THE ANCIENT INHERITANCE

February 8, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)

I recently suggested that studying the history of the so-called "[Dark Ages](#)" gives a wonderful background for understanding contemporary Christianity worldwide. Nowhere is that more true, oddly, than in the central theme of globalization itself. When you explore the world of Late Antiquity, roughly from the fourth century through the ninth, you see a Christian world that was enthusiastically transcontinental, if not exactly global. Repeatedly, we see influence and ideas transmitted from old churches to new and emerging bodies, and then later returning to the parent churches in odd and unexpected ways.

I have a long-standing interest in the early Irish church, which was seemingly perched on the distant fringes of the civilized world. Yet that sense of isolation is very misleading. From the time of its conversion in the fifth and sixth centuries, Ireland was closely connected to the wider world of Gaul (France) and beyond that to the Mediterranean. Time and again, scholars of Irish art and literature trace literary sources or artistic motifs direct to Visigothic Spain, and beyond that to Christian North Africa. If we ever wonder where the rich cultural life of North Africa went after the land was devastated by Vandals, Byzantines and Arabs, we have our answer. Not surprisingly, Early Ireland had a massive library of apocryphal gospels and scriptures as complete as any in Western Europe.

This thoroughly cosmopolitan church then set out on the great missionary endeavor into Scotland and Northumbria (Northern England), in the process creating some of the greatest cultural and artistic centers of the contemporary Christian world.

In the land we now call England, the Irish ran up against another Christian mission, directed from Rome. The original mission of 597 was heavily rooted in Italy, but subsequent ventures were even more broadly based. In 668, the Pope revived the English mission by sending two towering figures, the Syrian/Byzantine [Theodore of Tarsus](#) and the North African [Abbot Hadrian](#).

Suggesting the very broad canvas of contemporary politics, Hadrian's journey through France was delayed because the local regime feared that he was being sent as an envoy from the Byzantine Emperor, perhaps to create a dangerous Anglo-Roman alliance. Actually, that's not as far-fetched as it might appear. The emperor at the time was Constans II, who had a very unusual interest in Western affairs, and in 663 had visited Rome itself – the first Caesar to do so in two centuries. Rumors claimed that he planned to move the imperial capital to Syracuse, far away from the Muslims who were storming his eastern frontiers. It's an intriguing thought – re-establishing the Roman Empire in the West as late as the 660s, possibly with a group of outlying allied states in Britain!

Politics apart, the mission brought a new dawn to the English church. In the words of Bede, as both Theodore and Hadrian were "well read both in sacred and in secular literature, they gathered a crowd of disciples, and there daily flowed from them rivers of knowledge to water the hearts of their hearers; and, together with the books of holy writ, they also taught them the arts of ecclesiastical poetry, astronomy, and arithmetic. A testimony of which is, that there are still living at this day some of their scholars, who are as well versed in the Greek and Latin tongues as in their own, in which they were born. … From that time also they began in all the churches of the English to learn sacred music, which till then had been only known in Kent." Hadrian the African has a claim to stand as the founder of English church music.

Meanwhile, native English Christians like Benedict Biscop traveled back and fore to Italy to find manuscripts and liturgical materials.

By the eighth century, England and Ireland were awash with Mediterranean influences of all sorts, which manifested in the legendary gospel books, in stone crosses, and of course in scholarly writing. In the early eighth century, the Bishop of Hexham had a "very full and noble library" (*amplissimam ac nobilissimam bibliothecam*) on the apostles and martyrs, particularly their sufferings, together with many other ecclesiastical writings.

It was probably through Theodore's influence that the Anglo-Saxons acquired their deep devotion to the Apostle Thomas, a saint cherished by Syrians, and celebrated in multiple apocryphal works that circulated in the British isles.

These Irish and English – proud heirs of that Mediterranean/African/Asian tradition – then launched themselves onto Western Europe. They sought to convert pagan societies in Germany and the Netherlands, but also revived the moribund churches of France and Italy. Their inheritance survived in such critically important medieval monasteries as Fulda, Bobbio, Luxeuil, and St. Gall. Centuries later, these were the libraries and schools where Renaissance scholars would rediscover precious manuscripts containing otherwise lost remains of Classical antiquity.

At the end of the eighth century, the Emperor Charlemagne turned to these Irish and English scholars to give a new cultural birth to what he hoped would be a restored Roman Empire in the West. His main assistant was the Northumbrian Alcuin, heir to all those Irish and English pioneers, and beyond them, to their Mediterranean inspirations. Charlemagne's efforts would lay the foundations for medieval Europe, and the Western world we know.

So no, there really is nothing terribly new about the concept of globalized Christianity. In fact, I increasingly think the term "Global Christianity" might need to be retired: if it is not global – can it really be Christianity?

THE FIRST GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

February 11, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

Through the years, I have written a good deal about the globalization of Christianity in the modern world, but that interest springs naturally from much older interests of mine in transnational linkages in earlier eras. As I posted recently, the church of the early Middle Ages was thoroughly transcontinental, with all sorts of unsuspected linkages between very distant regions. Nothing could be further from the truth than to imagine Dark Age Christians skulking at home in their villages and local monasteries. In many cases, they knew a much wider world, and they were shaped by its influences.

Although it's not specifically a Christian example, I always enjoy one piece of trivia, namely the coins of the eighth century English king Offa, a contemporary of Charlemagne. In the 770s, he decided to mint some rather splendid coins, which are among the oldest surviving examples of their kind in England. On the coin's back, there is what the designer obviously thought was fancy decorative work on the original he copied from, which was an Arab dinar. And that is why the coin of this strictly Christian king bears the Islamic declaration of faith, in Kufic script! Multiculturalism long before its time…

What matters here is that Middle Eastern goods were circulating even in the British Isles, and were avidly imitated by local craftsmen. (In France, Spain and Italy of course, such influences had far less distance to travel.) This helps us understand how literary and artistic Christian influences from distant Palestine, Syria or Egypt made their way to the far West, to manifest themselves mysteriously in manuscripts, paintings and carvings. We should not be surprised when we see very Mediterranean looking vine-scroll decoration on Anglo-Saxon stone crosses in remote corners of England or Scotland.

In my homeland of Wales, archaeologists have found plenty of traces of such Mediterranean links from the obscure years from around 400-650, when the country was already thoroughly Christianized. Several settlements have produced high-quality pottery from the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as Byzantine and Egyptian coins, while memorial inscriptions still continued to use the high-flown language of the Roman and Byzantine courts.
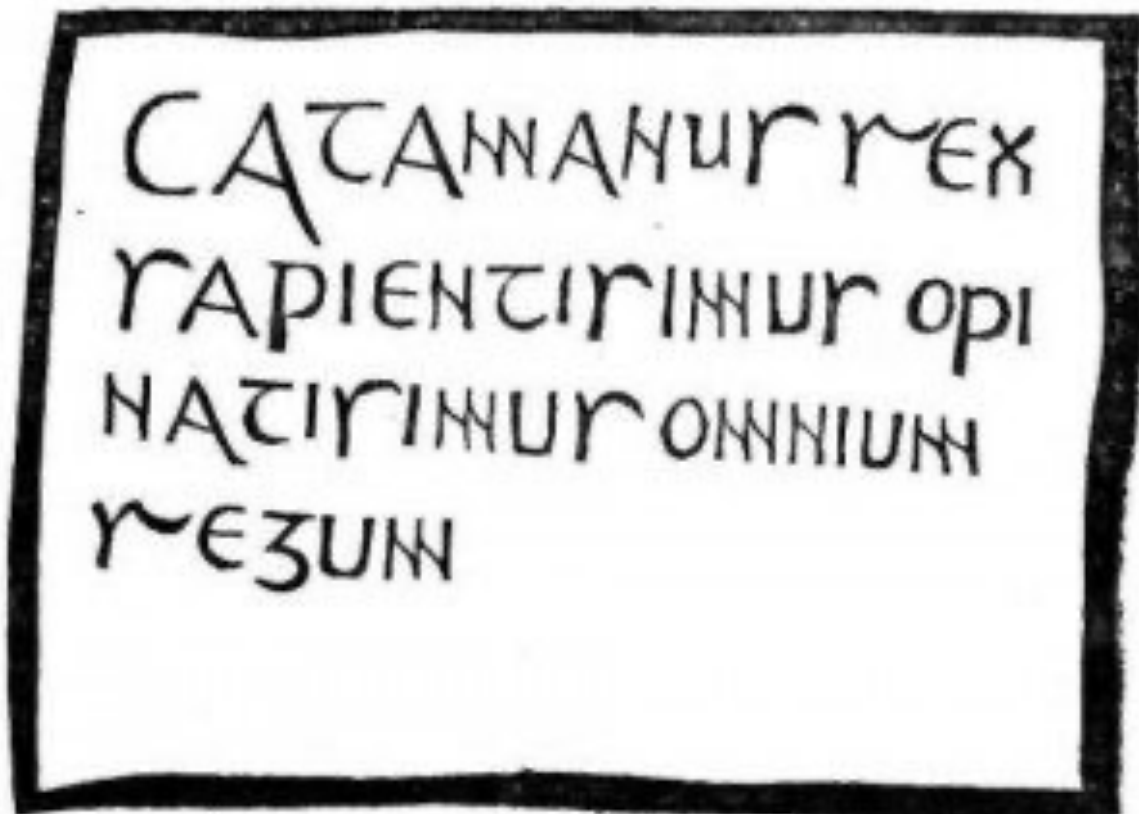
That Welsh context would be so important because of its strong influence on Ireland, and ultimately on the wider English and European churches.

Around the year 590, one Welsh chieftain decided to call his son Maurice, from the emperor then reigning in Byzantium, and as *Meurig*, the name became very popular throughout all ranks of Welsh society. Variously Anglicized as Morris, Merrick and Meyrick, it survives today as a common surname – although few people who bear it know that Dark Age/Byzantine link! Also around 600, other Welsh adopted the Byzantine name Theodore, *Tewdwr*, which eventually became Tudor. Others favored Eugenius – which became Owen.

And then there was Adomnán, the brilliant monk who headed the island monastery of Iona in the late seventh century. He wrote a hugely popular Life of St. Colmcille (Columba) Iona's founder, and also (around 680) a superbly detailed and largely accurate account of the Holy Places in Palestine, *[De Locis Sanctis](#)*. You might ask an obvious question: how on earth did a monk living off the western coast of Scotland in the darkest of the Dark Ages happen to have the information that would allow him to write the book? Well, obviously, a passer-by had stopped off to tell him. Specifically, Adomnán was reporting what he had been told by a Gallic bishop named Arculf, who had visited Palestine, Egypt and Constantinople around 680, and was then shipwrecked at Iona on his return. Incidentally, not only did the Muslim occupiers not hinder Arculf's tour, but he actually tells favorable stories about the Caliph, Mu'awiya.

Around 820, the Irish scholar Dicuil gave a good description of the Pyramids based on what he had been told by a group of Irish monks who had seen them as they were sailing up the Nile. The monks had stopped off to measure these marvels, which they did quite accurately. (They thought they had visited the granaries that Joseph had built for Pharaoh many centuries before). Suggesting the wide range of the world known to Irish Christians, Dicuil also reports other monks who had apparently visited Iceland, long before its official "discovery" by the Norse.

When we look at the medieval church, it's often hard to appreciate the connections with the older Christian world of the Mediterranean, the world of the Roman and Byzantine empires. In fact, though, the linkages between old and new churches were much stronger and more direct than we might imagine.

In the furthest West, Christians never forgot they were part of a world rooted in Jerusalem.

OUT OF EGYPT

February 22, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[1 Comment](#)

Material objects can evoke distant periods of history far more powerfully than even the greatest texts. Sometimes, they can also teach astonishing lessons.

In the study of early and medieval Christianity, one of the most significant finds of modern times occurred in 2006, when peat diggers in Ireland's County Tipperary uncovered a psalter from around the year 800, still in its original binding.

The psalter was a fundamental part of the worship of the Irish church, who divided the whole corpus of 150 psalms into the Three Fifties," recited constantly. For Irish archaeologists, this Faddan More Psalter was the greatest single discovery since the legendary Ardagh Chalice turned up in 1868.

Although we can never know for certain, it is likely that the psalter was a treasured item that its owner hid in a time of threatened violence, presumably a Viking raid. The fact that it was not recovered means that the owner – a monk or nun? – perished or was enslaved, and never returned.

As an intact book from this era, the Faddan More Psalter is an amazing enough find in its own right. Even so, its story became even stranger in 2010, when archaeologists reported finding eighth century Egyptian papyrus in its cover. One remarks that "The cover could have had several lives before it ended up basically as a folder for the manuscript in the bog. … It could have traveled from a library somewhere in Egypt to the Holy Land or to Constantinople or Rome and then to Ireland."

But the Ireland/Egypt connection is not necessarily a surprise. We have long known that the Irish church maintained strong links with the Mediterranean, and especially with those Eastern regions in which monasticism began. Just as Egyptian monks went off into the "desert", so Irish and Welsh solitaries resorted to remote corners that are still today remembered through such place-names as Dysart or Dyserth.

Egyptian themes also appear regularly in the material culture of the Irish church, and of the English congregations that it influenced so powerfully. In an eye-opening piece some years ago, William Dalrymple discussed this "Egyptian Connection": "*One of the earliest known Insular gospel books, the Cuthbert Gospels, is bound and sewn in a specifically Coptic manner, which Michelle Brown believes indicates 'an actual learning/teaching process' linking Egypt and Northumbria. The same process is hinted at in the Book of Kells, which contains an image of the Virgin suckling the Christ child clearly taken from a Coptic original: the virgo lactans was a specifically Coptic piece of iconography borrowed from the pharaonic image of Isis suckling the infant Horus. The Irish wheel cross, the symbol of Celtic Christianity, has recently been shown to have been a Coptic invention, depicted on a Coptic burial pall of the fifth century, three centuries before the design first appears in Scotland and Ireland.*"

As I have remarked elsewhere, "globalization" is by no means a new feature of Christian life!

THE DARK AGES

February 1, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
4 Comments

As a Cambridge undergraduate in the 1970s, my emphasis (major) was in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, a peculiar product of that university. Essentially, ASNC was about the Dark Ages in the

British Isles and Scandinavia from roughly 400 through 1100AD, studied from a broad interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on history, literature, languages, art history and archaeology. (By the way, scholars of the period hate the term "Dark Ages," but I'll use it here for convenience). The department now has a fun [recruitment film](#) on youtube.

I never for an instant regretted choosing that path, particularly since the group of professors I had at that time was utterly stellar. But the emphasis has posed some difficulties in later years when people want to know what I did at college: "You did *what*?" True, it does sound, um, abstruse. As time goes by, though, I realize that I could not have chosen a field better suited to my later scholarly career, or to some of the most significant hot-button issues in the study of Christianity. As I study global Christianity today, I still find insights from what I did all those years ago as an undergraduate.

Inevitably, Christianity was absolutely central to studying the Dark Ages. The central fact of the era was the conversion of those regions to Christianity, which meant thinking about the nature of mission, and the relationship between old and new faiths. When for instance a formerly pagan society accepted Christianity, how much of their old ways should they retain? How many old customs or cultural forms could be brought within the scope of church life? Moreover, Christianity meant literacy: how did that transform the older society, and what scope did that allow for the old spiritual and cultural leaders, whether pagan priests or druids?

For many years now, my main area of research has been in Global or World Christianity, namely the historic shift of the faith's center of gravity to the Global South, to Africa Asia and Latin America. In many instances, the issues at stake in this growth are very similar indeed to those of the Early Middle Ages. In Africa, for instance, Christianity boomed when it broke free from the constraints of the European missions, and developed a mass following among independent churches with native leadership. Often though, Western Christians were (and are) alarmed at what seemed to be concessions to old pagan ways, in matters like healing, exorcism and spiritual warfare. The debates resonate immediately with anyone familiar with Europe's own conversion era.

Sometimes, the parallels between early and modern eras go beyond general similarities, and extend to traceable influences. In the year 601, [Pope Gregory the Great](#) wrote a famous letter to Abbot Mellitus, who was about to join the mission in south-eastern England. The Pope advised him about the proper treatment of pagan temples, once the people had accepted Christianity. He wrote, "*that the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let water be consecrated and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed there. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more freely resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. And because they are used to slaughter many oxen in sacrifice to devils, some solemnity must be given them in exchange for this, as that on the day of the dedication, or the nativities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they should build themselves huts of the boughs of trees about those churches which have been turned to that use from being temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer animals to the Devil, but kill cattle and glorify God in their feast.*"

This advice was sane, pragmatic – and widely imitated. When Catholic clergy arrived in the newly conquered lands of Central and South America, they bore with them copies of Gregory's letter, which shaped their response to the old native temples in that region. As in England, the process of converting buildings and festivities was wildly successful.

As [Fernando Cervantes](#) writes, "*The works of Bede and Gregory the Great, for example, were widely available in Mexican libraries, and the famous letter of Gregory to Bishop Mellitus often cited. This gave rise to the widespread practice of erecting Christian churches on top of former pagan temples and of burying idols underneath new Christian altars. An illustrative glimpse of the process can be gained from a liturgical play entitled The Sacrifice of Isaac, performed in Nahuatl (the indigenous lingua franca of central Mexico) during the 1538 Corpus Christi pageant. From a modern perspective, it might be thought there was an obvious risk in having God demand the sacrifice of Abraham's son on stage on the very feast day that commemorated the voluntary sacrifice of a human being whose broken body and spilled blood were to be sacramentally ingested. But this seems not to have bothered the friars. Inspired by the words of Gregory – "the Lord revealed himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the devil to be offered thenceforward to himself instead" – they built on indigenous notions and made a clear Christological link between the sacrificial son and the victim venerated on the feast of Corpus Christi. This was no isolated instance: barely a year later, the junta eclesiástica of 1539 stated that the situation in Mexico was "the same" as in Augustine's England and Boniface's Germany. Even after the narrowing strictures of the Tridentine decrees enforced a more cautious approach, the Dominican Diego Durán could still write enthusiastically about the idea of turning the sacrificial receptacles known as cuauhxicalli – literally "eagle basins" – into baptismal fonts: for "it is good that . . . what used to be a container of human blood, sacrificed to the devil, may now be the container of the Holy Spirit."*

Many scholars would see such an act of "conversion" in the Mexican cult of the [Virgin of Guadalupe,](#) who bears many feature of an Aztec goddess who was once worshiped on the site of her apparition at Tepeyac in 1531. Today, the Virgin is a central feature of Mexican religious life, and Pope John Paul II elevated her to the rank of Patroness of the Americas, both North and South.

Another fascinating parallel for me has been the relationship between old and new churches. In the Dark Ages – excuse the phrase – missionaries built new churches in Ireland and England, which soon went on to amazing cultural and spiritual glories. By the eighth century, these regions were sending their own missionaries to revive the moribund churches of Western Europe.

The children, in other words, outgrew the parents. In numerical terms at least, something similar is happening worldwide today, with the spectacular growth of churches in Africa and Asia, and these bodies are now sending their own missionaries to reconvert Western Europe.

Odd though it may sound, I could not have chosen a better foundation for studying the state of the world's largest religion as it passes through one of the most revolutionary eras of change in its entire history.

REDISCOVERING PATRICK

March 15, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[2 Comments](#)

This weekend, many millions of people around the world will commemorate St. Patrick as a symbol of Irish national pride. I intend no slight whatever to that national consciousness, nor do I criticize the general partying that claims it as an excuse. What is sad, though, is that portraying Patrick as a generic medieval saint with a powerful fondness for the color green prevents us seeing a real and

genuinely heroic individual. He is moreover a person we can know much more thoroughly than the vast majority of his Christian contemporaries in Late Antiquity.

Virtually everything that his modern adherents know about Patrick is factually wrong, and that statement does not just apply to the expulsion of the snakes. He did not bring Christianity to Ireland. However we date Patrick's life – and exact chronology is notoriously difficult – his mission began after the arrival of one Palladius, who in 431 was "consecrated by Pope Celestine and sent to the Scots [Irish] believing in Christ, as their first bishop." First there were sporadic Christian communities, then there was Palladius, then there was Patrick – and possibly a great many more of their kind. And far from achieving an overnight conversion, the process took at least a century or two.

Oh, and Patrick wasn't Irish: he was British. Deal with it.

Nor, through most of the Middle Ages, was Patrick regarded as any kind of national Irish symbol, rather than one great saint out of many. His shrine at Armagh was hugely venerated, but no more than other centers such as Clonmacnois, Glendalough, Kildare, and the island of Iona. The later glory of Patrick reflects the political triumphs of his medieval successors at Armagh.

What makes Patrick stand out from his contemporaries, though, is that we can know him through his own unquestioned words, rather than the embellishments of later hagiographers and hero-worshipers. Somewhere around 450, he heard of attacks being made on him by bishops in Britain and Gaul. They had heard of his missionary successes, but were dubious about the means he was using to win them.

Anyone familiar with contemporary missions will recognize the picture – deep suspicion for someone working outside the mainstream agencies and churches, going off on his own, rumors of dubious financial practices. Why was he making such lavish gifts? Was he *buying* converts?

In response, Patrick composed a [*Confession*](), which translates best as a Declaration. In the modern sense of the word, he confessed nothing, beyond admitting his sinful and ignorant state. Point by point, though, he answered his critics. He tells the famous story of how Irish raiders abducted him from his British home. He escaped, but returned as a missionary. He offers a wonderful account of what mission actually meant in those days, in a situation where the bishop could not count on any aid from the Roman Empire or the secular power, beyond the kings or chieftains whose favor he could win.

In a society like that, gifts were an absolute foundation of social life and interaction, and to refuse them was to cut yourself off from any hope of success. Certainly, he tried to be careful about the appearance of corruption. He tells us for instance of "the pious women who of their own accord made me gifts and laid on the altar some of their ornaments and I gave them back to them, and they were offended that I did so." It was a delicate balance.

The *Confession* is eminently worth reading, and I still discover new nuggets whenever I open it. One point that struck me this time was how much Patrick emphasizes the role of women in the conversion process. We hear for instance that "*a blessed Irishwoman of noble birth, beautiful, full-grown, whom I had baptized, came to us after some days for a particular reason: she told us that she had received a message*

from a messenger of God, and he admonished her to be a virgin of Christ and draw near to God. Thanks be to God, on the sixth day after this she most laudably and eagerly chose what all virgins of Christ do. Not that their fathers agree with them: no—they often ever suffer persecution and undeserved reproaches from their parents; and yet their number is ever increasing. How many have been reborn there so as to be of our kind, I do not know—not to mention widows and those who practice continence."

In passing, Patrick describes a poignant feature of the Irish religious scene. He writes, *"But greatest is the suffering of those women who live in slavery. All the time they have to endure terror and threats. But the Lord gave His grace to many of His maidens; for, though they are forbidden to do so, they follow Him bravely."* These slave women were probably British captives seized in raids like the one that had originally claimed Patrick, and like him, trying heroically to keep their faith in their miserable new situation.

Patrick's greatest defense, though, was the results he had achieved, the "many thousands" he baptized. In pagan Ireland, *"those who never had a knowledge of God, but until now always worshiped idols and things impure, have now been made a people of the Lord, and are called sons of God, that the sons and daughters of the kings of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ?"* How could this not be God's work?

Patrick also wrote another and actually much greater document, the *Letter to Coroticus*, which I discuss in another column at RealClearReligion. But from one document or both, I hope I make my point, that we are dealing here with a truly great Christian leader.

MOCKING THE MONKS

March 6, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

For much of human history, it is exceedingly difficult to hear the voices of ordinary people, and especially of those whose ideas run contrary to the approved ideologies of the day. Through the long Christian Middle Ages, for instance, it's hard to reconstruct the mindset of people who did not agree with basic church teachings. Even when courts quote the voices of heretics, we never really know how far judges are putting words into their voices, in accordance with their expectations; or whether the alleged heretics are editing their sentiments to appeal to some audience.

It's always striking then to find a text that does give us some view into the minds of society's "outs," even if that means reading flat contrary to the intentions of the author of a given text.

As a case in point, I look at a saint's life from a highly obscure part of the Middle Ages, the seventh century in Britain. When the Venerable Bede recounted the conversion, he told a story of heroic missionaries, of noble kings delightedly receiving the word of God, and of evil pagans plotting against the divine truth. Stereotype met stereotype.

With one exception. In Bede's *Life of Cuthbert*, written around 725, he tells a remarkable story of the building of a Northumbrian monastery probably around the 650s. Monks sailed up the river Tyne to fetch timber, but as they returned, they were caught in a fearsome storm that seemed likely to wipe them out. Any contemporary reader would have known what to expect at this point, namely that the

prayers of a saint would calm the storm (on the best New Testament model) and save the endangered monks, and indeed, this is what occurs.

What we don't expect, though, is the reaction of the sizable body of onlookers, a multitude of lay people, peasants, who watch the imminent disaster with delight. "The multitude began to deride [the monks'] manner of life, as if they had deserved to suffer this loss, by abandoning the usual modes of life, and framing for themselves new rules by which to guide their conduct." Let them sink!

Cuthbert denounces their callous disregard for life, and urges them rather to pray for those in peril. But he receives a fascinating reply, as "the rustics, turning on him with angry minds and angry mouths, exclaimed, 'Nobody shall pray for them: may God spare none of them! For they have taken away from men the ancient rites and customs, and how the new ones are to be attended to, nobody knows'." Only after the miraculous rescue do they change their minds, as they praise Cuthbert and his amazing powers.

It's a wonderfully convincing moment. The king has ordered the people to convert and to destroy their temples and shrines, and outlawed pagan worship. At this stage though, it's a top-down conversion. Neither he nor the new church elite has offered anything new to replace the old order, leaving ordinary people floundering in spiritual confusion. More practically they absolutely lack protection against the forces of spiritual evil that they believe beset them. The picture convinces utterly – but where else do we hear of what must have been such a common response to the arrival of Christianity? I imagine ordinary rural people felt very much the same during the Reformation, after the destruction of medieval Catholic rites and symbols.

What a lesson for all later generations of missionaries!

The sentiments might be obvious – but they are so rare as to be precious historical evidence of social attitudes. All credit to an honest historian for preserving them.

DYING QUIETLY

March 3, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

Whenever I teach Christian history, I feel a strong obligation to discuss the methodology of approaching early texts, to understand how they are put together. The best single resource I have ever found for this purpose is Bishop Stephen Neill's [Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961](#), which was subsequently revised and expanded by N. T. Wright in 1986. When you have read this book, you have acquired an excellent grasp of how scholars read ancient manuscripts. You understand how (for instance) they decide that one reading rather than another is likely to be authentic, and the stages by which incorrect or extraneous materials creep into the text. Take this as an unqualified recommendation for Neill and Wright! (*Note to Tom Wright: isn't it time for another update? An awful lot has happened since 1986*).

Neill's work was in my mind last year when I was doing some work on the great early English saint Cuthbert. Although Cuthbert died in 687, he was in the news because of a treasure that was buried in his tomb, a [copy of the Gospel of John](#) that is the oldest intact European book. In 2012, it sold for $14 million.

In other ways too, Cuthbert marks some spectacular firsts. Around the year 700, a monk on the remote northern English island of Lindisfarne sat down to write a *[Life](#)* of the recently departed saint, which is the very first known literary work written by an English author. So venerated was Cuthbert that just a few years afterwards, he was the subject of a second biography, by the brilliant English scholar Bede, writing just sixty miles away from Lindisfarne.

And this is where I come back to Stephen Neill and the reading of ancient texts. When I was an undergraduate many centuries ago, I read both these *Lives* for a tutorial, and I was delighted to make an independent discovery about how stories grow over time. (My supervisor was the legendary Anglo-Saxon scholar, [Peter Hunter Blair](#)).

How did Cuthbert die? We know for certain that he resorted to a hermitage on the barren Farne islands, best known today as the haunt of seals and seabirds, where he died. Bede's account of the death is famous. The account of Cuthbert's final sufferings runs for several pages, and ends with an elaborate speech including "a few strong admonitions respecting peace and humility." The dying saint particularly warns against "those who err from the unity of the Catholic faith, either by keeping Easter at an improper time, or by their perverse life." This was all highly relevant to the religious and political conflicts of the time.

That's what Bede thought about the death around the year 725. It is interesting then to turn back to the earlier Lindisfarne Life, according to which Cuthbert spent most of his final days alone, pausing only to heal a monk called Walhstod who came over from Lindisfarne to attend to him. After taking communion, "[Cuthbert] lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, he commended his soul to the Lord and, sitting there, he breathed his last, and without a sigh [*sine gemitu*] went in the way of his fathers." He died "without a sigh" – or without delivering any of the lengthy and political addresses we read in Bede.

Now, there are two obvious choices here. Either the Lindisfarne *Life* knew all about the improving words in the deathbed speeches, but modestly decided to omit them; or else, Cuthbert actually died quietly, and Bede or his sources decided to invent what that the great saint should have said, had he but thought to do so. Obviously, Option B is vastly more likely, if only because no biographer could conceivably have failed to include those great speeches if he had access to them. The fact that the author lived in the Lindisfarne community means that he would certainly have known the stories if they had been circulating at that early date.

Bede was a superb historian, who would never have dreamed of inventing material, but he was only as good as his sources. In this instance, we know exactly where he was getting his Cuthbert material. As he says, "I will describe his death in the words of him who related it to me, namely, his attendant priest Herefrid, a most religious man, who also at that time presided over the monastery of Lindisfarne, in the capacity of abbot."

My conclusion, then, was simple. Cuthbert died quietly. At some point between 700 and 720 or so, Abbot Herefrid invented the speeches Cuthbert should have given, stressing themes that seemed appropriate to the church of his own day. He then passed the material on to Bede, who had no reason to doubt it, given the excellent source – Herefrid was the abbot of Cuthbert's own monastic house, for heaven's sake.

Really, though, there is no alternative to concluding that the account of the saint's death is fictitious, and that, unusually for the Middle Ages, we actually can name the person who invented the legend. That detracts not an iota from Cuthbert's achievements or reputation, but it does suggest how stories grow over time.

By the way, that finding also raises a red flag over any other piece of information attributed to Herefrid.

Putting that together single-handed back so many years ago was one of the great educational breakthroughs of my college years. I like to think it also gave me a suitably critical attitude to any and all other historical sources!

THAT'LL BE THE DAY THAT I DIE

March 1, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

March 1 is the feast of [David](#), the early medieval bishop and missionary who became patron saint of Wales. We actually know strikingly little of David apart from that date, of March 1, but I'm going to suggest that represents a good deal in its own right.

Through the Middle Ages, Christians cultivated particular saints, treating them almost as modern sports lovers follow football teams. They collected memorabilia and souvenirs, they traveled to great ritual occasions celebrating the saints, they wore symbols boasting their loyalty. Devotees of St. Audrey bought souvenirs so memorably tacky as to give us our word "tawdry"! Often, these cults became so florid as to overwhelm the real achievements of the saints themselves.

David himself belonged to Wales's remarkable age of saints from the fifth through the seventh centuries, when a band of heroic leaders maintained and expanded a rich Christian culture despite the catastrophes of social collapse and barbarian invasion. For centuries, David was only one great saint among many in Wales, whose reputation competed with other mighty leaders – Beuno, Illtyd, Cadoc, Dyfrig, and others. Over time, though, the churches that followed his name gained enough wealth and power to achieve superiority, and to write the Lives that would secure David's primacy among the group.

His cathedral at [St. David's, formerly Menevia,](#) is a gem of church architecture, with its gorgeously colored stone. I should warn you that few photos ever catch its shifting colors, which vary so much at different times of day and seasons of the year – you just have to go there to see it yourself.

Ultimately, David became the national saint, and the symbol of patriotism. As early as 930, patriotic poets were talking of raising David's pure banner against the English. When the Kings of England started naming their eldest sons Prince of Wales, David's Day became part of British royal symbolism and celebration.

As I say, we really know very little about David that is historically solid and can only guess at his dates, or his main areas of activity. A death about 590 is a reasonable guess, but we could easily slip fifty years either way. Oddly though, we can be sure that he died on March 1, whether in (say) 532 or 632 AD. Through the Middle Ages, hagiography was a vast area of cultural effort, when almost any outrageous achievements could be credited to a saint. (No, David did not really make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he was ordained by the Patriarch). The one thing that we know these writers did keep faithfully was the death day – the date not the year – because that marked the hero's ascension to glory, the promotion to heaven. In a particular church or community, those days were critical, as marking the annual celebration of the beloved local saint.

Argue as much as you like, then, about precise years, achievements, martyrdoms and areas of activity, about the number of lepers cured and tyrants opposed – but don't quarrel with death days.

Death days.

It's an interesting term. I know my birthday. I also know that at some future point I will die, and that that will befall on a particular date. Let me be optimistic and assume that it will be a distant event, say on July 23, 2049. Each year, then, I pass through July 23 happily unaware that I am marking my Death Day, surely as significant a milestone as my birthday, but not one I can ever know with certainty until it occurs. Nor is it something we really ever contemplate, as we all know, in our hearts, that we are immortal.

I suppose though that it is something we can learn from those medieval monks, that the Death Day is not just a key event in anyone's life, but literally the only one we can take with absolute confidence.

ILLTUD AND THE END OF A WORLD

March 10, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

This column is about one of the truly great Christians of Late Antiquity, but someone you will probably not have heard of. In a world falling into ruins, he kept faith and learning alive. His name was Illtud – and finding him demands a little detective work.

You have to be *really* famous for people not to mention you by name. Suppose for instance I was discussing religion in 1950s America, and I talked about "that great evangelist, with all his revivals and crusades, the man who prayed with presidents," but without giving a name. It's a reasonable assumption that I mean Billy Graham, but the fact that I expect you to know that means that I must be dealing with a household name.

Let's go back now to Britain in the sixth century, a time of extraordinary violence and social collapse. One of the very few writers whose words survive was Gildas, who around 540 denounced the kings of his day. A special target of his wrath was the powerful Maglocunus, of North Wales. At one point, Gildas says he should have no need to warn the king, who had "had as instructor the refined teacher of almost the whole of Britain" (*cum habueris praeceptorem paene totius britanniae magistrum elegantem*). Presumably through this early influence, Maglocunus himself in later life had taken up the monastic life, although he had soon reverted to his brutal secular ways. Gildas does not need to name this legendary teacher, this *magister*. Maglocunus would know it and so, more important, would all Gildas's readers. How many "teachers of almost the whole of Britain" could there be? Why spell it out?

Who, around 500, might have enjoyed this kind of fame? In one sense, we have too many possible answers. Lots of later medieval saints' lives described spiritual heroes living around that time, and claimed that every king and scholar beat a path to their door – but we don't have to believe anything written five hundred years after the event.

But one near-contemporary text does describe such a "teacher" at just the right time and place. One great saint of the early sixth century was Samson, who settled at Dol in Brittany until his death around 565. Samson's nephew wrote a biography, which was later adapted about 610. That gives us a good link to the real Samson, who was born to aristocratic parents in south Wales about 486: both his parents' families served the royal courts of local kingdoms. At the age of five, Samson was sent to study under the great teacher Eltutus, whom the Life praises to the skies as "of all the Britons the most accomplished in all the Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, and in learning of every kind, of geometry, rhetoric, grammar and of all the theories of philosophy."

Now, this makes great sense. Through the Middle Ages, one of the most celebrated Welsh saints was Illtud, whose name in Latin form was Eltutus or Iltutus. Although his medieval Life is late and dubious in its historical quality (he's allegedly a cousin of King Arthur), there is no doubt that we are dealing here with a very influential figure of the fifth/sixth centuries. He is also frequently cited in saints' lives as their teacher or mentor. Illtud is by far the best candidate for Gildas's *magister* – indeed, really the only plausible claimant.

His famous monastery was at Llanilltud Fawr, "Illtud's Great Church," which survives today as the lovely village of Llantwit Major in South Wales. The village stands in the Vale of Glamorgan, a wealthy and fertile territory with abundant evidence of Roman occupation, with its road system and villas, and a powerful fortress nearby at Cardiff.

Llantwit Major itself had a villa, although there is as yet no direct evidence of a link with the medieval monastery. In the ninth century, another local "Samson" raised a memorial stone here to a number of local saints, including of course "ILTET."

Documentary evidence in land charters shows that at least from the sixth century, the region was still divided into basically old-style Roman estates, which operated under something like Roman land law. In the fifth century, Iltutus would presumably have lived and worked in a highly Roman environment. It's a fair assumption that he would have been a member of the local landed elite, who turned his old secular property into a monastery. Such examples are well known in contemporary France and Italy. Incidentally, we appear to have at least two similar cases quite nearby in the Vale of

Glamorgan itself, at Llancarfan and Llandough, where the line of descent from older Roman buildings into monasteries is clear.

What makes Illtud's story somewhat different is its traditional Celtic quality. Curiously, the Life of Samson adds that Illtud's family was already celebrated for prophecy and knowledge of the future, and he was born a magician. Seriously, are we dealing here with a descendant of druids, as well as Roman landowners?

Assume that Illtud was born around 450, and created a monastery with a thriving school. I have already suggested that it's in the mid-late fifth century that [monasticism](#) makes its first major impact on the British church, and thereafter the movement grew rapidly. Llanilltud became so famous that it attracted royal and aristocratic families from across Wales, and further afield – "almost the whole of Britain," in fact. He taught kings. Gildas himself was probably another pupil, and his words to Maglocunus sound as if he is harking back to a shared experience under the same teacher. Several other Breton saints claimed Illtud as their teacher. Through those leaders – and through Samson and Gildas – the influence of the Llanilltud monastery-school permeated the emerging church in western and northern Britain, in Wales, in Brittany and western Gaul, and (most important for the long term) in Ireland.

Illtud surely deserves the title of the spiritual godfather of the emerging Celtic church.

But let's look again at those dates. Illtud's career would have reached its height between perhaps 480 and 520, a time of catastrophe in much of Britain. At least in southern and eastern England, the old Roman order had [collapsed utterly](#), the cities were falling into ruins, and the ecclesiastical structure was evaporating. The Latin language was close to extinct, and the [British Celtic tongue](#) survived among slaves and the underclass. British/Welsh culture flourished in northern and western Britain, among the new warlord society, who maintained some Roman names and pretensions – but precious little survives of any intellectual endeavors.

And at this worst of times, Illtud kept alive the Christian faith and Roman education of an older more "elegant" world. It's an astonishing achievement.

It also makes us think of a European near-contemporary who similarly tried to formulate a new Christian civilization amidst a falling world. I mean St. Benedict of Nursia (480-547), who is no less than the patron saint of Europe. The two men, Benedict and Illtud, had so much in common. When we commemorate the one, we really should remember his British contemporary.

THE THREE WISE DRUIDS

April 26, 2013 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

I have been working recently on the survival of [ancient alternative gospels](#) and other scriptures through [the Middle Ages and Early Modern period](#).

Ireland especially was a staggeringly rich treasury for "lost" early Christian texts. This would be so important because of the critical role that Irish monks played in the conversion of England and Scotland in the sixth and seventh centuries, and their activity through much of Western Europe over the next two hundred years. This influence reached its height with the so-called Carolingian Renaissance associated with the Emperor Charlemagne from the late eighth century. Across France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy, some of Europe's greatest centers of learning were founded either by Irish monks, or by their English disciples. Mapping their efforts often explains the movements of alternative scriptures, and their influence.

Ireland's conversion to Christianity began in the fifth century, although the process probably took a century or more to complete. The country held a curious position in the Christian world. Lacking a history of Roman occupation, it had none of the political structures that shaped the church elsewhere. Without cities, bishops could have nothing like the same central role, and the church's life depended on monasteries. Only with the English Conquest of 1170 was the Irish Church fully integrated into the standard Catholic structure and hierarchy.

Yet if earlier Ireland existed outside the Roman political realm, it was unequivocally part of the wider cultural world. At least from the fifth century, well-known routes of trade and communication united Ireland and Western Britain with Spain and Western Gaul, and beyond that to North Africa and the Levant. Egyptian influences were particularly strong. Amazingly, we even find some knowledge of the Greek language in the Irish church, at a time when this was a very rare treasure indeed in most of Western Europe.

Not surprisingly, then, Irish monasteries held impressive collections of manuscripts that seem to have come from these ancient Christian territories, and they could have acquired them anywhere from the fifth to the tenth or eleventh centuries.

Successive conquests and cultural changes have taken a heavy toll of Irish libraries, but enough remains to show just how rich the apocryphal collections would have been. Modern scholars like Martin McNamara, Máire Herbert and David Dumville have painstakingly collected these records, discussing over a hundred items known in Ireland. Many are poetic elaborations of well-known stories, but we also find a full spectrum of widely known alternative texts. In many cases, the texts survive in the vernacular, in Irish Gaelic.

Irish churches were thoroughly familiar with such Old Testament apocryphal texts as the Life of Adam and Eve, the Apocalypse of Moses, and Jubilees. From the New Testament apocrypha, they knew the Epistle to the Laodiceans, multiple versions of the Descent into Hell, the Letters to Abgar, Pseudo-Matthew, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, and all the standard Lives of the Apostles.

Surprisingly, Irish clerics had direct knowledge of the Protevangelium, the Infancy Gospel of James, which is the source of so much legendary lore about the Virgin Mary and her family. This work was very well known in the Greek and Syriac-speaking Eastern world, but far less so in the Latin West. Most of Western Europe, in fact, adapted the material into the gospel known as Pseudo-Matthew. Ireland, though, knew this Eastern text first hand, among many others.

Writing of the Magi who sought the baby Jesus, one medieval book records the range of different pseudo-gospels that offered some light on the event: "This is what James of the Knees says in his

Gospel of the Children…. This is what Matthew son of Alpheus said in this Gospel, and in *Libro de Infancia Mariae*, ie in the book in which is narrated the Birth of Mary." The wonderful name "James of the Knees" refers to Jesus's brother, reputedly so devout in prayer that his knees were as callused as the skin of a camel.

Irish writers were so at home with such works that they freely adapted them into their story-telling. When St. Joseph sees the Magi approaching, he calls his son Simeon and tries to explain their odd behavior: "I fancy, my son, that it is the omen art of the druids, and it is soothsaying they are practicing, for they take not a single step without looking up, and they are discussing and communing one with another among themselves." They are in fact describing the Three Wise Druids – or rather the Seven, as Irish sages usually claimed.

As sources for sober history, we need not pay too much attention to some of these texts. In other cases, though, tantalizing hints suggest some of the real gems that might have been available to the Irish church, including some early alternative gospels. I'll talk about these in a future post.

THE FIRST ENGLISH BIBLE

April 17, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
9 Comments

I have been writing about the Other texts that shaped Christian thought through the long Middle Ages, all the alternative gospels and apocryphal texts that literate people read with almost the same veneration that they paid to the canonical scriptures. One problem with finding such materials is that we often don't know exactly the point of time at which they were used. In Armenia, for instance, a host of apocryphal texts survived, but in fairly late copies – sixteenth century or afterwards. It's a reasonable assumption that these were read much earlier, but we can't be entirely sure.

In one case though, historical circumstances give us an accurate terminus date, so that we have a true cross-section of what the church was reading at a particular time. The resulting picture of that one particular Christian culture is amazing in its breadth and, frankly, its oddity. It also raises important questions about exactly how the limits of the Bible were defined during long stretches of Christian history.

Anglo-Saxon England was converted in the century or so after 597, and in the following centuries became one of the liveliest cultural centers of Western Europe. Scandinavian invasions caused massive damage in the ninth century, but Anglo-Saxon culture and literature continued to flourish until the Norman Conquest of 1066. Within a couple of generations after that cataclysm, the Anglo-Saxon language ceased to matter as a learned tongue. When we find a text associated with the Anglo-Saxon church, then, we can say confidently that it was used somewhere between 600 and 1066 or so, and is very unlikely to be much earlier or later.

A century ago, M. R. James remarked that "the Anglo-Saxon and Irish scholars seem to have been in possession of a good deal of rather rare apocryphal literature," mainly in Latin but occasionally even

in Greek. The content of that library has attracted much scholarly interest in modern times, in books like *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England* (2003), edited by Kathryn Powell and Donald Scragg, and Frederick M. Biggs' *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture: The Apocrypha* (2007).

With that material in mind, what can we say about the English Christian bookshelf? It certainly included all the canonical books of the Bible, as well as such deuterocanonical works as Judith, Tobias, Wisdom, and Sirach. But English clergy also knew and read a sizable body of Old Testament pseudepigrapha, including 1 and 2 Enoch, Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, as well as Psalm 151. They also used the bizarre Irish text *De Plasmatione Adam*, which was added to the older *Life of Adam and Eve*.

Among New Testament apocrypha, few doubted the authenticity of Paul's Letter to the Laodiceans or the Gospel of Nicodemus, with its account of the harrowing of Hell. Apocryphal Lives of the Apostles were especially popular. Partly due to the English church's curious [connections with the East Mediterranean](#), the Syrian saint Thomas was a beloved figure. Hexham's eighth century bishop Acca built up a very full and distinguished collection (*amplissimam ac nobilissimam bibliothecam*) of the lives and Passions of the apostles and martyrs, among many other ecclesiastical books.

Anything dealing with apocalyptic or the End Times commanded special interest, including the Apocalypses of Thomas and Peter, the *Visio Pauli*, and the Christian sections of the Sibylline Oracles (*Versus Sibyllae de Iudicio*). Also in circulation was Christ's alleged correspondence with king Abgar of Edessa.

Devotion to the Virgin Mary meant that scriptures and pseudo-gospels concerning her life or career circulated widely (See Mary Clayton's *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*). Some texts described the Virgin's birth and upbringing (the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the *De Nativitate Mariae*), others her Assumption and passing from this world (*Transitus S. Mariae*).

Quite apart from surviving manuscripts or contemporary references, we see the influence of these alternative scriptures in art and poetry. The Book of Cerne includes a fragment of an eighth century play based on the Harrowing of Hell, which is incidentally the oldest play written in England. The Book of Enoch is a prime source for the common theme of the Fall of the Angels.

Modern readers draw a strict line between canonical scripture and such lesser forms as apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, and hagiography. Such divisions would have been hard to explain in an era when, basically, books were books, and most of what was written was likely to be, of its nature, sacred. It's useful here to look at neighboring Ireland, which had access to an even more spectacular range of apocryphal scriptures. David Dumville notes that in Old Irish, the word *canóin* (canon) "did not have the meaning of 'established fixed Canon (of Scripture etc)' but referred always to *text as opposed to commentary*. … there prevailed no clear and immediate mental distinction between canonical and uncanonical biblical texts." Generally, that remark certainly applies to England.

However broad-minded in their attitude to canonicity, Anglo-Saxon readers were by no means uncritical in their acceptance of these other texts, which might serve to admit heretical teachings. Nor did they automatically assume that texts were in fact written by the authors whose names they bore. For one thing, clergy had access to ancient works that discussed these issues at length, especially Fathers like Jerome (although that did not help with texts written after his time). Bede, in

the eighth century, acknowledged doubts about the authorship of some texts, but still advocated reading them. Enoch, for instance, was clearly suspicious, "but because that book which is presented under his name is considered not truly written by him, but edited by some other one under the title of his name." Yet it still merited reading, especially because it was cited as scriptural in the New Testament epistle of Jude.

Other scholars were more dubious, and the eighth century scholar Aldhelm condemned the *Visio Pauli*, the Apocalypse of Paul. So did the later writer Aelfric, who would probably have supported a wholesale national purge of apocryphal manuscripts if that had been vaguely feasible. In fact, he consigned many to a damning category of *lease gesetnysse*, "false compositions." Yet even Aelfric cited apocryphal accounts of the Virgin's birth and parentage as authoritative. He also cited the fifteen letters of Paul, including Laodiceans. Lacking the resources of later scholarship, just how was it possible even for such a skeptical and widely-read churchman to tell what was canonical and what not? Googling was not an option.

If we look then at one thriving Christian nation around 1000 AD – roughly, the halfway point of the Christian story to date – then "Holy Scripture" was still a flexible concept. It definitely included, say, the Gospel of John, but alongside other books now largely forgotten that also carried authority. Regardless of what ancient councils had declared, the de facto canon of scripture was much wider than we think of today. Indeed, the English canon at that time had much in common with that of the present-day Ethiopian church, which also grants full recognition to Enoch and Jubilees.

The medieval English church then – regarded at the time as a paragon of Catholic orthodoxy and papal loyalty – was reading a package of scriptures very different from any modern Western concept of the Bible. This mattered so much because, far from being isolated at a distant corner of Christendom, the English church in its day was one of the world's great missionary bodies, sending offshoots and church plants across Western Europe, into France, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and beyond. And where those missionaries went, they took the Bibles they knew.

IRELAND'S LOST GOSPELS

May 3, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I recently posted on the wide range of alternative scriptural materials that survived in the early Irish church – and apparently, in very few other places in the Christian world.

But it is in the realm of gospels that Ireland produces the most surprising findings. Throughout the Middle Ages, scholars across Western Europe make startling references to gospels otherwise thought lost, often presented under the guise of a Jewish-Christian gospel. We can debate at length what exactly they might have been referring to, but often, we can track their citations back either to the influence of Ireland, or to Irish monasteries founded in Western Europe. Irish clergy used some very strange texts, and even treated them as canonical.

By the eighth century at the latest, Irish scholars commenting on the canonical gospels cited alternative readings that they found in a work they called the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, and the work continued to be used through the twelfth century. Around 850, it was quoted by Sedulius *Scottus* ("the Irishman"), the scholar who was so critical in transmitting Irish learning to Latin Europe. Almost casually, he refers to the apostle James swearing not to eat until after Christ had risen from the dead, "as we read in the Gospel according to the Hebrews."

We can't be wholly sure that this is the same "Hebrews" that is cited by earlier scholars like Jerome. Medieval writers were often careless about quoting the titles of the works they cited, and they applied generic names like "the Hebrew Gospel" to a wide variety of mysterious texts. In this case, though, the work that the Irish had certainly fits those ancient characterizations. At no point do they suggest that this work was obscure or hard to obtain: it was just part of familiar Irish libraries.

Around the year 1000, moreover, an unknown European monastery compiled a manuscript of the Roman writer Sallust, using for the cover some discarded parchment. That trash, though, proved to be a fragment of an older Irish missal or sacramentary, showing appropriate readings for different feasts and special occasions. At the Mass of the Circumcision, the reader would have begun "Here begins the reading from The Gospel According to James, son of Alphaeus." This is exactly the format that would have been used to introduce a passage from canonical Mark or John, with no indication that this text held any different status.

From the text quoted, a brief account of Jesus's circumcision, it is impossible to know just what else might have been in this gospel, but it bore a weighty name. In the sixth century, the Western church had already known (and rejected) a Gospel under the name of James the Less, that is, the son of Alphaeus.

Successive invasions and waves of destruction have uprooted much of Ireland's early Christian culture, especially from its most glorious age that ran from about 550 through 800. Enough, though, remains to suggest that Ireland in these years must have retained a library of alternative Christian texts that would have astounded – and perhaps horrified – mainstream church authorities in Rome or Constantinople.

NINIAN AND FINNIAN

February 2, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I've written a good deal about the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the era that in parts of Europe we commonly call a Dark Age. This was a remarkable time for Christian survival and growth in some areas – and of the destruction of the faith in others. This was for instance the great age of Celtic saints Patrick and Illtud. Another very important member of the group is all but forgotten today, or at least given nothing like the credit he deserves. In fact, he may be two of the greatest saints you never heard of. This is a complex story, and an interesting example of how really important figures slip out of official history.

In modern Wales, St. Ninian was a very famous figure because he indirectly gives his name to Ninian Park, the longtime stadium of Cardiff football team. (The park is actually named after Ninian Crichton-Stuart, a local aristocrat killed in the First World War). But according to mainstream church history, Ninian was in his day a very important figure.

According to Bede, writing about 730, Ninias (Ninia) converted the Picts of Southern Scotland, and created a great church at White House, Candida Casa, which became Whithorn. Because the church was dedicated to the Gallic Saint Martin of Tours, who died in 397, early writers assumed that Ninias was operating at this time, perhaps into the early fifth century. Those dates are not impossible, but they are much earlier than most comparable British saints, and scholars have long favored later dates for Ninias – at least in the early or mid-sixth century.

Ninias/Ninian was the subject of an eight century *Miracula Nynie Episcopi*, Miracles of Bishop Ninia. He also became the focus of later biographies, which suggest that their writers really had not much more information about him, although they do cite some intriguing names. They knew that he was important, but not exactly why. Churches dedicated to Ninian can be found all over southern and central Scotland. Rioght through Reformation times, Whithorn was a major center of pilgrimage.

Ever since the mid-nineteenth century, scholars have wondered exactly who this Ninian was, or indeed, his exact name. Bede calls him Ninias, and only in the twelfth century does the form Ninian appear. It's a long story, but let me summarize briefly. A consensus today suggests that both those names might conceal an original version, which began not with N but with U, two letters easily and frequently confused by medieval scribes. And while the name Ninia or Ninias is not known before Bede's time, the form Uinniau certainly is, and it belongs to some well-known and influential men.

In later Irish, the name appears as Finnian, and one saint of this name is almost certainly the same individual as the Ninias recorded in Scotland. This is Finnian of Moville, in Newtownards, County Down, Northern Ireland. Finnian would have been active around 540 AD, and he seems to have been a distinguished scholar and teacher, who produced some very significant pupils.

The greatest of these (around 540) was St. Colmcille, founder of Iona, and one of the most venerated Irish saints. Moville was one of Ulster's most important monasteries and schools.

Of course, the identification with Ninias does not just depend on a similarity of name. Once we compare the lives of the two men, we see some impressive coincidences in terms of their career, and the individuals with whom they interacted. Some scholars even think that the name of "White House" could have been taken from a form of Finnian's name, meaning "Fair."

It's not too difficult to see what has happened here. In the post-Roman era, roughly that horrible century and a half after 450, Uinniau was a missionary and scholar who set up monastic settlements on both sides of the Irish Sea, in Northern Ireland and Southern Scotland. The distance between the two regions is tiny, and we know the sea routes were very well traveled. (Bold modern souls have even swum this so-called North Channel, which is about twenty miles wide).

The British remembered part of his career, the Irish the other, but not until modern times was this heroic figure rediscovered, or perhaps reintegrated.

We see his influence in the Penitentials, a vast and important literary genre in the early Irish church. These books provided detailed guidance for confessors hearing sins, and allotting penances and punishments, and in the process, they give massive information about social, cultural and sexual history. Although these survive chiefly in Ireland, the oldest of all penitentials were clearly composed in Britain and under the guidance of British churchmen. One was the famous Gildas, author of one of the very few contemporary documents to survive from Britain in this era. Somewhere between 520 and 540, Gildas was consulted in these penitential matters by an Irish cleric called Vennianus, who is very probably our Finnian of Moville – and who is also our Ninias.

To avoid even more confusion, I am not here getting into another contemporary Saint Finnian, associated with Clonard, and a near-contemporary of our man of Moville. The exact relationship between these two may also need to be redefined. One "Finnian" wrote the very earliest Irish Pentiential.

Here's a suggestion: Uinniau/Finnian/Ninias lived some sixty years or so after St. Patrick. If a couple more of his writings had happened to survive, perhaps the medieval and later worlds would have regarded him as one of the very greatest Western saints, on a par with Patrick. He was one of the founders of that great British-Irish Christian tradition.

Of Monks, Mounds and Massacres

October 26, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

In my undergraduate years, I studied early and medieval Celtic history, with a heavy concentration on matters Irish. A couple of lessons from those days help understand contemporary academic debates, not to mention our appreciation of Christian history.

The first issue arises from an excellent recent issue of *American Archaeology*, about the important Native American site of Spiro Mounds, Oklahoma, which operated from the ninth century through the fifteenth. Elizabeth Lunday has an article with this subheading: "For years Spiro Mounds was thought to be a Mississippian chiefdom that flourished from trade. But a noted Spiro expert now believes it was a ceremonial center. The first excavation of this important site in more than forty years could confirm or refute his hypothesis." So was it an economic center, or ceremonial? In support of the latter view, archaeologists note the burial of key ceremonial figures. The "Spirit Lodge" was associated with "channeling the power of the sacred goods and revered dead of the community."

My problem is that we absolutely should not segregate such concepts as "ceremonial" or ritual from "economic." Just suppose that one of those Spiro chiefs or priests was miraculously transported to contemporary Europe, say to Ireland in 900. He would have felt totally and utterly at home in one of the country's monasteries, such as Clonmacnoise or Glendalough or Armagh. Each place was formed as a ritual/ceremonial center to commemorate a specially venerated saint. Over time, pilgrims came from all over the island to that place, bringing gifts, which accumulated to spectacular proportions.

The cult of particular saints, like Patrick or Kevin, thus supported a huge amount of economic activity, and the work of craftsmen and merchants. Everything contributed to "channeling the power of the sacred goods and revered dead of the community."

The key events of the year, though, were the feast days of the famous local saints, and Patrick's day was only one of a great many commemorated around the island. On that day, the monastery in question became a thriving commercial center for trade, meeting, socialization and gift exchange, not to mention artistic and musical celebration. You could become a serial pilgrim, spending the year hitting a succession of such fairs, much as modern day Hindus circulate around the multiple shrines and feasts of Mother India.

Although that kind of activity occurred all around medieval Europe, Ireland was special because, before the Vikings, it had no towns or commercial centers except for what clustered around the monasteries. Irish trade and urbanization was wholly synonymous with what the monasteries and saints offered.

So were these activities ceremonial/ritual or economic? Emphatically, yes and yes, and I would strongly assume that Spiro played a very similar role indeed, given the lack of "secular" towns or cities in the Americas north of Mexico. Flourished from trade or flourished from being a ceremonial center? That really strikes me as an utterly false division.

The bottom line: looking for the "secular" in pre-modern times is a hopeless quest.

And that brings me to my second takeaway, namely about the Vikings and their impact on medieval Europe. The Vikings hit monasteries brutally hard, and in Ireland especially, they targeted their attacks brilliantly to coincide with the fast days of the great saints, when the monasteries were teeming with lay visitors. They usually carried off many slaves, especially women. We know a lot about this activity because other monks reported it in agonizing detail.

Modern scholars have learned a great deal about the Vikings and their complex social life. They rightly stress that the Norsemen were not simple thugs, that they gave a vast stimulus to economic life, their art was impressive, and so on. These themes all emerged strongly in the recent British Museum exhibition on "The Vikings: Life and Legend." That exhibit stirred a great deal of commentary in the press and on the Internet.

All of which is fine, but here's the problem. In an attempt to revise the Vikings' images as mindless savages, we often hear these days an argument that goes something like this. The Vikings were traders, they were immigrants, their effects on European society were beneficial. The reason we think so ill of them is that they targeted churches and monasteries, making the clergy hate them, and those bigoted priests and monks wrote their polemical histories accordingly. Anyway, those monks were greedy exploiters, so sacking the monasteries was probably a good thing.

I quote Neil Oliver, author of a recent book called *Vikings*, who scorns the monks' denunciations of the Norsemen:

In truth, the unpardonable sin of the Vikings was to be pagan, still committed to the gods Odin and Thor. The peoples of Scandinavia were the last in Europe to accept Christianity and for as long as they remained heathen their

violence against Christians was unclean and unforgivable. So the grief of Alcuin and the rest of the hand-wringing clerics was nothing more than the holier-than-thou pronouncements religious bigots are wont to make about those they consider unbelievers. Ruthless and violent the newcomers certainly were, but they only gave as good as they got.

Charitably put, this is baloney, as we see from earlier remarks about the role of monasteries and churches in societies. No, church writers did not attack the Vikings because they were pagan. Nor did Vikings pass by the nearby big secular cities so they could go and kill monks. They hit the monasteries because they were the centers of population, of trade and of economic activity, and where you were likely to find the local country people gathered together. Where secular centers did exist, as in Paris, the Vikings happily sacked them too. They raided churches because that's where the treasures of the community were.

One of Oliver's arguments is that in Ireland or Britain, for instance, Christian lords themselves often engaged in horrendous massacres, desecrating churches and monasteries and slaughtering their occupants. Hence, why were the Vikings singled out for doing exactly the same thing, if not for their inconvenientpaganism? But here's the problem. If you look at the excellent Irish records, you do indeed find some such Christian-led massacres and desecrations, but virtually all of them occurred *after* the Viking onslaught. That is, the monasteries and churches were largely respected before that date, but the Vikings just fundamentally changed the rules of the game – they really were utterly different from what had gone before. That's not a new finding, and there's no excuse for not acknowledging it.

If you feel like presenting a favorable side of massacre, rape, robbery, and mass enslavement, go ahead. I'm sure the Islamic State is always looking for effective Public Relations people. But don't think the Vikings gained their reputation just by being anticlerical, or being pagan. They really were as savage as their reputations suggested. And they hit the monasteries because those stood at the essential heart of Christian society.

And just incidentally, no, the Scandinavians were not the last people in Europe to accept Christianity. That would be the Lithuanians in the fifteenth century.

Bringing Back the Dark Ages

June 3, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I am about to say something really contentious and controversial: Dark Ages happen, and I believe in them. And I actually have some new evidence to support that shocking conclusion.

Oddly, this seemingly abstruse topic is in the news right now. The agency English Heritage just published a timeline showing the era 410-1066 as the Dark Ages in Britain, which generated a controversy among historians. Both sides agreed that the long time span was ridiculous, but they differed on whether the term could be applied at all.

Let me explain the issues here. In bygone decades, historians used to look at certain eras and apply that Dark Age title to them. The classic example was Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, and especially the years between, say, 450 and 750. Familiar evidence of settlement and building all but vanished from the archaeological record: cities and villas faded into disuse. Also, written historical sources dried up, suggesting that literacy shrunk. An organized "civilized" society had collapsed, to be replaced by a barbaric order. The classic stereotype is of a roofless, ruined, Roman villa, with some filthy peasants building a fire to stay warm amidst the fading Classical mosaics. And that was a Dark Age.

Similar patterns emerged in other eras, especially the three centuries or so following the collapse of the great Bronze Age empires of the Near East, around 1150 BC. Look for instance at a classic interpretation like Anthony M. Snodgrass's *The Dark Age of Greece* (1971).

Those "Dark Age" societies were very important for the history of religion, not least because they tended to be highly productive of religious developments, but also because religions often provided the vehicles that kept older ideas live. Medieval Europe, for instance, was a sea of darkness enlightened only by the monasteries. The post-Bronze Age Near East was the setting for the emergence of ancient Israel.

Move the film forward, though, and Dark Ages became very unfashionable indeed. In more modern interpretations, there were multiple reasons to avoid the term, and to some extent they reflected new political perceptions, chiefly of a left/progressive nature.

First, to speak of the collapse of civilization suggested a judgmental approach that was elitist and even pro-imperialist. Yes, perhaps imperial authority had withdrawn, but the life of ordinary people carried on much as before. Village life endured, and was even vastly improved by the absence of centralized states and tax collectors. The decline of written sources and literacy might have affected elites, but these were always a remote upper crust. Maybe the cities are no longer reading Virgil, but those egalitarian local communities are composing their own vernacular treasures. So why was that a decline or a deterioration?

Below the level of those vanished elites, there was a thriving world of villages and small towns, trade and crafts, so which Dark Age are you talking about? Who gave you the right to say that an era with a strong state – and a strong colonial/imperial order at that – was somehow superior to what followed? These ancient "civilizations" were absolutely based on slavery. So villas disappeared, so what? Isn't that like bemoaning the collapse of modern-day gated communities and BMW dealerships?

Seeing things from the bottom up, (in that view), Dark Ages for the rich might actually be golden ages for the poor.

Reinforcing that approach, much recent archaeology has claimed – with varying degrees of plausibility – to stress continuity from older Roman orders in Europe, and even Britain. (I have posted about this issue multiple times in the past. See here, for instance). I am wryly amused to see the amount of intellectual effort that goes into denying or underplaying evidence of barbarian invasions and occupations in those eras, and ignoring the clear evidence of the servitude and suffering imposed on older native peoples.

In consequence, if you are writing European medieval history and you use the term "Dark Age," you had better be using it ironically, or you will attract derision. Depending on the setting, the approved terms are now Early Medieval, or Late Antiquity. So always put "Dark Ages" in quotes, and you will be fine.

Here is where I disagree, fundamentally.

When the Dark Age notion was originally coined, by Petrarch in the 1330s, he used it to cover the whole Middle Ages, basically from the end of the Western Empire in 476 right up to close to his own day. That is far too expansive, in terms of both time and space. But the phrase is useful if properly defined, and limited to those grim years between roughly 450 and 750.

As I read the evidence, "Dark Age" societies like those of post-Roman Britain actually *were* dark in the sense of severely shrunken and impoverished. Decline was a complex process. Populations declined very steeply indeed, in a way that suggests severe contractions in agriculture, in the area of occupied land, and especially the volume of trade. Towns and trading centers imploded, leaving people confined to a grim subsistence economy. No coins were minted in Britain between around 400 and 650, suggesting the severe shortage of trade. The lack of state mechanisms put the burden of defense and law enforcement on militarized local communities, creating a barbarian order where the life of man was indeed nasty, brutish and short. We are looking at far-reaching societal collapse. In more senses than one, a Dark Age society is a shrunken world.

What we today call infrastructure is one aspect of all this. High civilizations produce roads, bridges, irrigation systems, ports, docks, lighthouses, and so on, all of which depend on strong central authority, and that promotes trade, communication and commerce. When they stop building and doing engineering projects, that means that communications decline accordingly. The less communication and commerce, the less need for that infrastructure. As the film almost says, don't build it and they won't come.

The military aspects of this also demand attention. Ancient empires had very large and sophisticated armies and navies, with all that meant for fortifications and siege-works, and those were a major driving force in technological change. When the great armed forces evaporated, so did the impetus for new developments in science and engineering, not to mention mathematics. And also medicine.

Watch the film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, and especially the wonderful sequence where someone asks, "[What have the Romans ever done for us?](#)" Listen to everything mentioned in that exchange, and then imagine all those blessings removed from the picture within a few decades. That is the difference between civilization and a dark age.

In the harsher new era, war and violence were constant, without central authority and armies to maintain order. That pervasive violence further disrupted what trade and commerce there were, and contributed to famine, malnourishment, and epidemic diseases. [As I have written elsewhere](#), "Pirates and privateers plunder sea travel, armies and bandits steal merchants' goods on land. Labor shortages and disruptions of trade wreck the economy, and often bring hunger to communities that always existed on the verge of subsistence. Weakened societies are vulnerable to plagues and epidemics, which are spread still more widely by wandering armies."

Very much the same observations can be made of the Near Eastern world in the post-Bronze Age era.

I say nothing here about the causation of such Dark Age eras, but climate certainly can play a role, in the sense of global warming/cooling, and sudden catastrophic events like volcanoes. Possibly related to that, major epidemics like those of the 530s can be cataclysmic in their effects. So can prolonged drought. In this context, I wish I could speak with more confidence about the Classic Maya Collapse of the ninth century AD, but that initially seems to fit the Dark Age model very well.

Let me take another controversial classification. Nineteenth century anthropologists divided human societies into three stages, savagery, barbarism and civilization, so that Man (usually man, not humanity!) rose to civilization. Such a division is now mocked, rightly in most respects. But to make an unpopular statement, civilization is indeed highly superior to barbarism, and in many different respects. Life is more peaceful and richer across the board, and for ordinary people as well as elites. People can trade and travel further afield in relative safety. They can explore and colonize new lands. They can build up possessions, and flourishing markets allow the growth of a complex society with craftsmen, merchants and what we might call transport professionals – people who run the wagons, carts and ships. There is even foreign trade, and not just in the sense of a few loads of amphorae for the chieftain on the hill. All those transactions demand writing, to keep records and accounts, and that meant schools, scribes, and schoolteachers. Division of labor is after all one of the key signs of civilization.

"Civilization" is thus defined by thriving trade and trade routes, successful cities and towns, marked by literacy and schools. It also implies high populations and intense population densities, with the expanding settlement and land exploitation needed to cope with it. The horizons of such a society are significantly larger, with contacts far afield, across the country in question, and overseas.

Technology in such societies is vastly higher and more sophisticated than in its "dark" successors. People don't just stop building great stone public works (for instance) because of a change in fashion, they have just lost the ability to do so. Life in Dark Age Europe largely depended on exploiting and reusing those old infrastructure developments that were now so far beyond current technological skills. Societies spent a millennium traveling along the old Roman roads and bridges, and stripping down the temples and palaces for their masonry. To appreciate the technological gulf, look at the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Ruin*, where a traveler passes the Roman ruins of a city, probably Bath, and can only assume that such great works must have been built by long-gone giants.

When you have a society that has been making great use of writing, and it suddenly stops doing so, that does not just mean that fewer sources exist for archaeologists and historians. It means that something very bad, and probably catastrophic, has happened to that society. The lack of written records and literacy really is a sign of collapse and decline, as is the (closely related) vanishing of towns.

You should also check out the provocative Wikipedia site on structural collapse, which describes several critical trends and characteristics: destratification, despecialization, decentralization, destructuralization, and depopulation.

In other words, there are plenty of objective measures by which we can measure Dark Ages. Unfortunately, and here is the irony, the relative lack of evidence from those eras means that quantitative comparisons are that much harder to undertake. Absences and negatives are, of their nature, hard to prove.

So, let me offer my own definition. We can look at an era and say that it is marked by *systematic societal collapse and cultural impoverishment, reflected in collapsing population levels, and acute declines in urbanization, technology, literacy, productivity, and communications*. Or, for simplicity, we can use the D word.

Hence, with all due caveats, I believe that the term Dark Age can and should properly be used. In my next post, I will look at some new insights into the term, and the processes it describes.

My illustrations, by the way, are taken from [Thomas Cole's amazing *Course of Empire* series](), from the 1830s.

The Saint as Marriage Counselor

December 8, 2016 by [Philip Jenkins]()
[0 Comments]()

One of the greatest Celtic saints was Colmcille, or Columba, who lived from c.521-597. About a century after his death, the scholar Adomnán of Iona composed a *Life* of the great saint, which is a treasury of information about the society and religious life of the time. Here, I want to explore one particular story, which tells us a great deal about church attitudes to marriage and sex in that time. It really raises some questions about historical context, on which I would request advice.

One day, the saint was on Rathlin Island, off the far northern coast of Northern Ireland (ii 42). A woman came to visit him to ask advice. She was married to one Luigne, a ship's pilot, who was either ugly or deformed, so much so that she could not bear to sleep with him or to have sex with him. The saint rebukes her because she is withdrawing her flesh from herself. What he means by this is that the marriage has united the flesh of the two partners in one, so that they shall be one flesh (citing Genesis 2.24, and also Mark 10.8). Married people are now one flesh, and part of that flesh does not refuse the other part, at the risk of incurring sin. One partner in a marriage should not refuse the sexual rights of another.

Now, early and medieval Christianity strictly rationed the number of days when a married couple could properly have sex, and by the later Middle Ages, large portions of the year were off limits, due to various feasts, fasts and holy days. At other times, though, one partner should not and could not properly refuse the other.

But Luigne's wife just would not oblige, or fulfill her marital duties. Instead, she offered the saint a number of options. She could live with her husband and be dutiful in every other aspect of life except the sexual; or she could go into foreign exile; or she could go into a nunnery. Anything else, but not the marriage bed. The story then continues:

The saint then said, 'What thou dost propose cannot be lawfully done, for thou art bound by the law of the husband as long as thy husband liveth, for it would be impious to separate those whom God has lawfully joined together.' Immediately after these words he added: 'This day let us three, namely, the husband and his wife and myself, join in prayer to the Lord and in fasting.'

But the woman replied: 'I know it is not impossible for thee to obtain from God, when thou askest them, those things that seem to us either difficult, or even impossible.'

It is unnecessary to say more. The husband and wife agreed to fast with the saint that day, and the following night the saint spent sleepless in prayer for them. Next day he thus addressed the wife in presence of her husband, and said to her: 'O woman, art thou still ready to-day, as thou saidst yesterday, to go away to a convent of women?'

'I know now,' she answered, 'that thy prayer to God for me hath been heard; for that man whom I hated yesterday, I love today; for my heart hath been changed last night in some unknown way—from hatred to love.'

Why need we linger over it? From that day to the hour of death, the soul of the wife was firmly cemented in affection to her husband, so that she no longer refused those mutual matrimonial rights which she was formerly unwilling to allow.

In the lives and miracles of medieval saints, there are lots of stories where they heal households, reconcile married couples, and so on. To my knowledge though, and I am prepared to be corrected, this account is very unusual in its explicitly sexual focus, the idea of inducing a partner to participate in sex with a spouse. In this case, the reluctant person is the woman, but as medieval belief saw women as more lustful than men, it is quite possible to imagine an account like this where a hypothetical saint orders a man to go to bed with his wife. But how common are such stories, in fact? It might be that this author is less circumspect than others, and other stories about family disharmony were in fact much more focused on sexual complaints, but monastic authors drew a modest veil over that fact.

Am I right here? Is this Colmcille tale as unusual as I am suggesting?

Medievalists assemble!

I also make another point. At various points in Christian history, church writers and especially monastics praised celibacy to the point of exalting celibates as the truest and most faithful believers. It would be easy to imagine a story like this being told with a "happy ending" in which the wife abandons the marriage and enters a convent. Alternatively, a hypothetical saint might advise the couple to stay together, but to eschew sex altogether: to live chastely as holy brother and holy sister. In this instance, though, the saint's power is displayed by restoring the marriage to its proper and divinely ordained state, complete with sexual relations.

On this occasion at least, celibacy did not win.

For convenience, I have here used an older online translation of the Life of Columba, but there is a newer and much superior version edited by Richard Sharpe, in Penguin Classics (1995)

Spreading the Faith: Daniel Syndrome

February 6, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Another in a series of posts about the many and various ways in which religions spread – often by people who originally had no intention whatever of becoming missionaries, or indeed of leaving their homes.

Sometimes, people really do set out to spread their religion to new parts of the world, and they enjoy great success in doing so. They might be acknowledged missionaries, consciously pursuing evangelization, or else they are refugees and utopians seeking better conditions in which to pursue their faith. Think of the Puritans and their "New England." In many instances, though, religions spread by non-intentional means, and these can be quite as successful as deliberate mission. Religions or denominations are carried along with larger migration movements. In other less studied cases, the people carrying religious traditions actually do so quite reluctantly, because they have no wish whatever to be in the countries in which they find themselves. (I will concentrate here on the Christian experience, but many of the same observations apply to the spread of other great faiths).

I have in the past written about what I call Daniel Syndrome, named for the Biblical prophet who found himself reluctantly transported to Babylon as part of a forced deportation. Historically, slaves, captives and deportee have actually played a very significant role in transmitting Christianity to new lands, or even in introducing the faith. Saint Patrick himself was carried to Ireland as a slave, and when he returned voluntarily in later years, many of the Christians to whom he ministered were themselves captives. Slaves and captives also introduced Christianity to the Caucasian regions on the fringes of the Roman and Persian empires, in kingdoms like Georgia and Iberia.

In ancient times, warfare often involved the capture of slaves, and the deportation or relocation of whole populations. Such a move could have unintended consequences. During the great wars between the Roman and Persian empires, Persian victories meant that many thousands of Christians were "imported" into their territories, where they created a greatly enhanced Christian presence.

I have previously written of the deeds of the Persian king Shapur:

In the 260s, Shapur settled many Roman prisoners he had taken during his successful war. A city emerged, bearing his name: Gundeshapur (Jundaisapur). In the fifth and sixth, centuries this emerged as one of the greatest intellectual centers of the ancient world, almost a facsimile of a research university, with a special focus on medicine. Although it is difficult to disentangle truth from legend, Gundeshapur is often cited as a major influence on early Islamic learning and scholarship. And it was, par excellence, a Christian center, base of one of the metropolitan provinces of the Church of the East. Its Christian identity became even more marked when it became a refuge for scholars fleeing religious

oppression in the Eastern Roman Empire. Not surprisingly, then, by the late third century, the Persian Empire found itself with abundant Christians, drawn from a wide variety of sources and ethnic traditions.

It would have been very difficult to convince those harrowed prisoners in the 260s that the catastrophes they were witnessing would lead to a vast flowering for their faith. Historically, though, wars and disasters often drive religious change and movement, at least as much as any conscious human intent.

Noel Lenski has a book chapter entitled "Captivity, Slavery, And Cultural Exchange Between Rome And The Germans From The First To The Seventh Century CE" in Catherine M. Cameron, ed., *Invisible Citizens: Captives And Their Consequences* (University of Utah Press, 2008). Dr. Lenski argues that captured Roman slaves were very significant for spreading Christianity among their Germanic captors. As he writes,

The first translation of the Bible into a Germanic language, Gothic, was undertaken by the descendant of Christian captives seized by the Goths during their invasion of Anatolia in the 250s. Ulfilas (Gothic for "Little Wolf") was directly related to a family of Christian clergy transported back to Gothic territory in the wake of these raids. His family, and no doubt other Christian captives, began the process of converting their captors in the later third century … [Ulfilas] went so far as to invent an alphabet, based on the Greek alphabet, with which to begin writing Gothic and then used it to translate the Bible.

Andrew Walls gives another example (see below for source):

We hear also of remote rural populations turning to Christianity because of what they had seen in the sufferings of Christian deportees being marched across their territory. And the slavery factor also enters the story of the church of the East. A section of the Hun people living in the Central Asian region of Bactria bought Syriac-speaking Christian slaves from sources in the Persian Empire. They made such an impression that the whole Bactrian Hun community decided to become Christians and, in an ironic twist, applied to the Zoroastrian emperor for a bishop to lead and teach them. They might not be experienced in ecclesiastical matters, but they knew that the faith they desired to embrace had come from within the emperor's dominions.

I read a fine recent book by Catherine M. Cameron, *Captives: How Stolen People Changed the World* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016). Although this focuses on New World indigenous groups, so much of what it says bears close parallels to ancient settings in the Old World. Particularly relevant are the sections on how captives import new ways, and help redefine captor societies. Her sections on cultural transmission relate closely to what I am saying about religious influence.

In a personal communication, Dr. Cameron writes that "it is amazing that no one has written a book about slaves as a vehicle for the transmission of religious ideas! There must be a world of data out there." She is absolutely correct.

In later periods too, a lot has been written about slaves, conversion, and religious transmission around the Black Atlantic: see especially Jon F. Sensbach's *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

As I mentioned in my earlier post, Andrew F. Walls offers a wide-ranging historical perspective on these matters in his "Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History," in *Global Diasporas and Mission* (Regnum Books, 2014), edited by Chandler H. Im and Amos Yong, 19-37.

Spreading the Faith: Moving Coins and Moving Communities

February 17, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I posted recently on issues of migration and mission, and how each of those terms can be applied to the spread of religions. In particular, I stressed the many factors that might cause a religion to spread, quite apart from conscious, deliberate evangelization. Often, we exaggerate deliberate missionary activity while underplaying the role of other forms of population movement that might be non-intentional, casual, even accidental, and definitely not directed toward religious goals. To illustrate this, let me draw a parallel with the spread of material goods.

When I was an undergraduate, one of the people teaching medieval history was the great Philip Grierson, who was primarily a numismatist, a scholar of coins. His classes were so memorable because he actually passed around original late Roman gold coins from his vast personal collection, objects of great beauty and value – and nobody left the room until every single one was accounted for. (There is a wonderful obituary of him). Quite apart from that showmanship, Grierson left a powerful impact on my own thinking by his remarkable ability to ask searching questions, particularly about issues of intention.

Grierson launched a minor revolution in history and archaeology, by asking the simple question of how a particular coin or treasure had ended up where it was found. (One key work was a 1959 article called "Commerce in the Dark Ages: A Critique of the Evidence.") If for instance you found a hoard of fourth century Roman coins in Sweden or Ireland or Persia, earlier scholars had discussed this as evidence of trade or commerce. Nonsense, said Grierson. Well yes, he said, it might conceivably have been commerce in something like the modern sense, but there were any number of other possible ways of transmission:

There are other means whereby goods can pass from to hand, means which must have played a more conspicuous part in the society of the Dark Ages than they would in more settled and advanced periods. They can be characterized most briefly as 'theft' and 'gift', using 'theft' to include all unilateral transfers of property which take place involuntarily – plunder in war would be the commonest type – and 'gift' to cover all those which take place with the free consent of the donor. Somewhere be two would be a varied series of payments, such as ransoms, compensations, and fines, while such payments as dowries, the wages of mercenaries, property carried to and fro by political exiles, would all form part of the picture. Our difficulty lies in trying to estimate their relative importance.

The hoard could have been plunder or booty, stolen during raids or warfare. (As career paths, raiding and trading merged seamlessly into one another). A precious object might have been tribute, given under a greater or lesser degree of coercion. It might have been a political bribe.

Or, critically, it might have been connected with the gift-giving that was such a critical part of early societies. That last mechanism was all the more important when we moved into societies where written evidence was sparse, as in the Viking era. Every heroic epic describes gift giving between chiefs and magnates, often on a scale that was – well, epic.

And whatever the means of connection, the coin (or helmet, or necklace) might have passed through twenty hands before it reached its final destination. It certainly need not have been a direct transition. The fact that object A was found in location B said precisely nothing about any direct relationships between A and B.

Grierson was highlighting the prejudices of mainstream economic historians, who naturally tended to see the past in rational and peaceful terms they could naturally identify with. Hence, they saw gold coins moving as commerce between peaceful communities, which made nonsense of old stereotypes of rampaging barbarians. In reality, those barbarian raids were by far the most likely means by which wealthy Romans might have been forced to give up their cherished treasures.

In fact, said Grierson, you shouldn't use loaded words like "commerce" without further evidence, as the very word implies some knowledge of intention. When in doubt about that intention, admit it: be agnostic. As he concluded,

In general, we do not know how coins or jewellery or similar objects reached their destinations, and with so many possibilities from which to choose any conclusions that we draw can only be of the most tentative description. Much evidence alleged to 'prove' the existence of trade proves nothing of the kind, and in dealing with the Dark Ages, in cases where we cannot prove, we are not entitled without a careful weighing of the evidence to assume.

People are different from inanimate objects, and in modern cases, you can actually ask them why they moved. But words like migration and mission absolutely imply intention, which might be obscure. Historically, people might move as missionaries or slaves, as refugees or utopian colonists, as economic migrants or fugitives from justice. In Grierson's terms, these individuals or families might have been gifts, or plunder, or items of commerce. In any of those cases, they often carried their religions with them. (The same caveats apply to understanding DNA evidence in terms of deliberate migration, but that is a different story).

In modern times, migrants usually move in search of work and a livelihood. And someone could and should write a magnificent book on the role of students as vectors of faiths and denominations.

As with the economic historians, scholars of religion have some unacknowledged prejudices. When they trace the spread of faith or faiths, there is a natural tendency to concentrate on the work of identifiable named individuals, commonly professional clergy or missionaries. Such accounts have the advantage of allowing readers to trace the narrative through one or more individual lives. The problem is that writing the past in such a way tends to exaggerate the significance of such conscious mission activity. Often, it also means retroactively imposing deliberate intention on a process that was in fact much more haphazard and undirected.

And Philip Grierson would have been astounded to see himself cited in the context of missionary history.

Of Slavs, Slaves, Vikings, and Genetics

April 21, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
5 Comments

I recently had a DNA test to help trace my ancestry, and the result surprised me. The larger story might shed light on one of the grimmest and most forgotten horrors of European history, an era of brutal slave trading.

By way of background, my known genealogy is very straightforward indeed. It shows close to 100 percent Welsh – not just Welsh, but one specific bit of south Welsh. That means mainly West Glamorgan, within a few miles of the city of Swansea, although with a couple of English guys in the 17th-18th centuries (In Wales, we call that "diversity"). I can identify all my ancestors through all lines back to about 1840, and far beyond that in some lines.

Hence, I am near pure 100 percent Welsh on all sides. However, through the years, I have faced a nagging question. Welsh people are stereotypically short and dark, which I am not. (I am 6'2", and not dark). Nor were my uncles and aunts, who were all pretty tall people. At least they were on my maternal side, and I'll explain in a moment why that distinction matters.

When I am in Europe, people all over the continent often have me marked as German, and address me as such. They greet a line of tourists like this: "Good morning sir!" "Good morning sir!" Then they come to me: "Guten Tag, mein Herr!" In Norway, the locals assume I am Norwegian.

What on earth is happening? Something was amiss. I was amiss.

Hence my inspiration to take the DNA test, and the result is fascinating. (I used FamilyTreeDNA). In total contrast to the genealogy, the DNA gives me as 90 percent British Isles origins and *eight percent Eastern Europe,* plus a smattering from south-east Europe. Now, it never pays to take such percentages precisely, but this is suggestive. And I can confirm that Eastern Europe linkage from another source.

More specifically, I had my mitochondrial DNA done, which only traces descent in the female line – mother to daughter to daughter, so that I cannot pass it on to my children. We measure this by the MtDNA haplogroup, of which there are a couple of dozen world-wide, and each is given a capital letter, so that for instance M is found among people in south east Asia, D in Japan, O in China, etc. There are also lots of subsets of those larger families. British Isles haplogroups are often J or T. The main MtDNA hapologroup in Wales is H.

My haplogroup, though, is none of the above, it is U, and specifically U4. It is in fact a striking (and quite rare) U4a1a, which points to Eastern Europe or the Baltic.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haplogroup_U_(mtDNA)#Haplogroup_U4

In the available commercial databases online, most people with that haplogroup tend to be Swedish, German, Danish, Polish …. Now, that statement is a bit slanted, as these databases only include people who have paid to get their DNA results done, so that would lead to a massive over-representation of wealthy northern Europeans. In no sense are these reliable scientific samples, nor do they say anything definitive about the actual distribution of U4 across Europe. Even so, U4 is not too common as a Welsh (or British) pattern. The furthest I can go back in my own female line is my great grandmother, and like all names on my chart, she was definitely south Welsh, with not a Pole or a Ukrainian in sight.

I should say by the way that I am not uncritically relying on these findings, which might be erroneous. But I have good reason to accept what I was told. In the paternal line, the results suggested individuals to whom I might be related, and I happen to know that those people and I share relatives with common surnames multiple generations back. There is no way a company could have cooked up such obscure, and uncannily accurate, findings. By extension then, I tend to trust the mitochondrial results.

My genealogy says one thing. My genetic information suggests something radically different.

Making life more difficult, in order to find the root of this genetic pattern, we would have to locate a woman, as only women carry MtDNA. We could not for instance assume an earlier woman in my ancestry who had a fling with a wandering Hungarian hussar in Napoleonic times. Nor, more seriously, can we invoke the many documented examples of skilled European workers traveling to Britain in early modern times, especially in pioneering Welsh industries like coal and iron. As far as I know, these visitors or migrants were all male.

So where does that U4 come from? I have an explanation – not the right one, necessarily, but an interesting speculation.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could somehow place a woman from the Baltic/Slavic regions in South Wales in the pre-modern period, preferably very close to where my maternal family originated? Surely, that is a very tall order. Oddly enough, though, there is a historical window in which we can do something very much like that, and with remarkable geographical precision.

Over the past two centuries or so, my maternal family simply has not moved around much (Nor has my paternal line, but that is a different story). They have in fact remained within that small area of West Glamorgan, around Swansea and Neath, never really moving more than twenty miles or so in any direction. For the sake of argument, let us then assume they have in fact been in that small part of south Wales for centuries. Aha, but then we find an interesting connection. What we know about that area is that it is right next to one of the key regions of Scandinavian settlement in the British Isles in the Viking era, the ninth and tenth centuries.

The most important Scandinavian center in South Wales was Sweyn's Inlet or Island, "Sweyns-eye" – that is, Swansea. It's an open question whether Sweyn or Sveinn refers to [a famous Norse king](#) of that name, or just a lone adventurer. Near Swansea, Scandinavian names occur across the region of lower Gower, but not upper. The wonderful coastal landmark of the Worm's Head in Gower is actually the head of the *Ormr*, Norse for a great Serpent ([and it really looks like a sea serpent](#)). A lot of the islands around the Welsh coast have pure Norse names like *holm* or *-ey*, as in Caldey. Flatholm

is the Island of the Fleet. Such names scatter all across the coastal map to West Wales places like Tenby, another Scandinavian name.

Not only did the Norse name such places, but they and their descendants remained long enough to ensure that other people adopted and remembered the names. These areas were not just temporary camps: they were important enough to be real settlements, over decades or generations. At least along the coasts, the Vikings were there in force.

So what was the gender balance of these Scandinavian ventures? We tend to think of chiefs and raiders as all male communities, seizing local women, but there was more to the story. As settlements became more established, they might have brought wives or prospective (free) marriage partners. Over the years, archaeologists have recognized ever more examples of Scandinavian women buried in Britain. Now, one of these free women might just possibly have brought the specific U4a1a type direct from Denmark or Sweden.

But other, more sinister, factors were also at work, involving slave women. As I say, we are looking at the 9th-10th centuries. At this very time, one of the world's largest slave trading operations was centered on the Baltic Sea, particularly seeking out slaves from the Slav and Baltic peoples. The word "slave" comes from "Slav," but Finland was another great center for slaves. There is a huge scholarly literature on all this.

Recent scholarship suggests that slavery and slave trading were a major incentive for the whole Viking enterprise, from the eighth century onwards. In a polygamous aristocratic society, lower status men found it hard to obtain wives within their own communities, driving them to seek women elsewhere, by force. Initially, they did this in Baltic lands like Estonia, but then mightily extended their reach. Following the rivers, some pushed deep into Russia, while others ventured into the Atlantic realms, but the basic goals remained the same. Reporting one major raid in 821, the Irish *Annals of Ulster* note that the heathens "carried off a great number of women into captivity."

Gradually, isolated slave raids evolved into a transnational business operation that ranged across Europe, and took many slaves to the Islamic lands. Captives would have been kidnapped and taken to one of the great Swedish slave markets at Birka or Gotland, or Denmark's Hedeby. Scandinavians did much of the raiding, while Arab traders served as financiers and middlemen, and the distribution of these slave markets is indicated by the hoards of Arabic coins, *dirhems,* in trading centers like Birka.

A great many of those captives and slaves must have had U4 MtDNA. As we look at the map of lands where the U4 MtDNA pattern is most common, we also see the regions most heavily raided for their slaves precisely around this time.

Slave trading was thus a very large part of the economic life of the Viking world. Among other things, their enterprises ensured that large numbers of Irish and British slaves (thralls) ended up in early Iceland, where they have left a large genetic mark on the modern population. It would have been very natural for a Viking, maybe even the Sweyn who founded Swansea, to have had some slave girls along, whether as bed partners or as inventory for sale. In Iceland at least, some unfree women achieved the higher status of an acknowledged concubine, a *frilla.* Or possibly, a freeborn Norse woman brought along her unfree serving women and maids, even her nursemaid or her lady's

maid. A female slave, by the way, was usually called an *ambátt* rather than a thrall. Over time, slaves might be freed and join the mainstream community.

Let us suppose that those unfree women had daughters, who intermarried with local Welsh men – perhaps married, or else they were sexually exploited without their consent. They might have been sold, traded, or used as gifts. Whatever the exact process at work, any of these interactions would explain the importation of the U4 lineage into Wales.

Life for these slaves was as miserable as you might expect. In Norwegian law, slaves and thralls were described in the neuter gender: they were "it" rather than he or she, and were classified as just slightly superior to cattle. This is very much confirmed by the horrible portrayals of thralls that we repeatedly find in the large literature of the Icelandic sagas. But that observation leads to a major point about the nature of our historical evidence. Material evidence for free or aristocratic Scandinavian women is easy enough to find in the archaeological record, because they were deposited in substantial graves and accompanied by possessions such as brooches or other jewelry, or even weapons. Slave women, in contrast, owned nothing either in this world or in the grave, and their humble burials left very little for archaeologists to identify. You just did not bury rich grave goods when a slave woman – an "it" – died. We will likely never find material remains of Viking slaves in Britain. All they might have left – just conceivably – was their genes.

So could Baltic or Slavic girls have brought their MtDNA to South Wales? Very easily. Might my own maternal family even be descended from one of Sweyn's slaves or concubines, someone from what we would now call Poland or Lithuania? I can't prove it, but it is plausible. If not Sweyn himself, there were lots of other comparable chieftains, who might have had girls recently imported from Birka or Gotland.

My suggestion, then, is that "Slav-raiding" and slave-trading are the main means by which U4 MtDNA found its way to the British Isles, and perhaps to other parts of Western Europe.

I am still puzzled by that eight-plus percent figure for my own East European blood, which goes far beyond a single woman a thousand years ago. And as I say, that element must have entered the bloodline well before the mid-nineteenth century. (Modern Wales has plenty of later migrants from that region, but they are not the explanation). I wonder: maybe those Vikings in Wales imported other slaves from the Baltic and eastern Europe, whose descendants merged completely into the local genetic mix. Their descendants perhaps became local Welsh families, called Jones or Evans, or Williams, or even Jenkins.

Even a handful of slaves leaving offspring could make a sizable genetic impact in such a tiny overall population. How many people did the whole of Wales have in, say, 1000 AD? Barely 100,000 in all? And perhaps 5,000 in West Glamorgan? Those were very small genetic pools.

What I can say confidently is that those Slavs or Balts did not originally migrate of their own accord.

For the regional context, see Michael North, *The Baltic* (Harvard 2015). On Viking society generally, see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (Penguin 2001). Kirsten A. Seaver has a chapter on Viking

women slaves in her "Thralls and Queens," in Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Calder Miller, eds., *Women and Slavery* (Ohio University Press, 2007), vol. 1: 147-167. See also Ruth Mazo Karras, "Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age," *Scandinavian Studies,* 62 (1990) 141-162.

I have not read it yet, but Alice Rio has a forthcoming book on *Slavery After Rome*, on the period 500-1100 AD (Oxford University Press, 2017).

From Wessex to the Exodus

October 16, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

Sometimes, scholarship from one era of history can throw quite unexpected light on a totally different time and place. Oddly, early medieval history can actually tell us something about Biblical events that happened a millennium or more previously.

I have been reading Richard Elliott Friedman's truly impressive new book *The Exodus*, in order to review it for *Christian Century.* Because of that forthcoming review, I won't say much about the book here, but here is its main argument. Friedman argues that the Exodus from Egypt really happened. It assuredly did not involve the two million or so people that the Bible asserts, and nor, he says, did it involve the whole people of Israel. Rather it was a movement by a much smaller group who became known as the Levites, who fled Egypt and moved to join the pre-existing settlement of the people of Israel in Canaan. Among other things, they imported their god Yahweh, whom they identified with the older El, the deity of the people of Israel. As the Levites wrote the history, they established the idea that the mass movement actually involved the whole of what later became the Hebrew people.

I am over-simplifying brutally, but that is a rough summary of Friedman's main case, and I think he establishes it convincingly.

So where do the Middle Ages come in? As an undergraduate at Cambridge, my emphasis was in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic Studies, which amounted to a degree in Late Antique and Early Medieval history and culture. One part of that concerned the messy origins of the English kingdoms after the Romans left Britain, and specifically the emergence of what would be the mighty kingdom of Wessex, the West Saxons. Wessex, in turn, ultimately evolved into the medieval English state.

We know exactly how Wessex began! Not only do we have an extremely convincing archaeological account of the process, we also have a detailed literary-historical account. The only marginal problem is that, um, the two accounts are not just different, they are close to irreconcilable, and that fact has been known for over a century.

The archaeology is quite clear. Anglo-Saxon people entered England from the eastern coasts. Over the fifth and sixth centuries AD, they migrated to the Upper Thames region, where a great kingdom emerged by the seventh century. You can see their material remains, their graves, jewelry and brooches, as they move steadily and decisively from the eastern shores where they landed.

The literature is also quite clear. The early text known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives precise details and dates about how the Saxons entered Britain from the south, roughly via Southampton and Portsmouth – the south, with no hint about an eastern presence. Reputedly, they were led by a warrior named Cerdic, who landed with his son Cynric in 495 AD. They and their followers then moved north to the Upper Thames, where a great kingdom emerged. Cerdic is the ancestor of the British royal family, right up to modern times.

So – from the east or from the south? Which was it?

The answer is actually both. The archaeology is telling us what happened to the *people* we call West Saxons. The literary-historical account tells is about one particular *family* or clan, who became the ancestors of the ruling dynasty. In later centuries, that dynasty had a special interest in its founders and ancestors, and they paid scholars and scribes to write them up accordingly. They focused on what Cerdic and his followers did, and that applied to matters of place, date, motive and, indeed, ethnicity.

Ethnically, Cerdic's family was a mysterious bunch. Later scribes supplied him with an impressive Germanic genealogy that traced his ancestry back to Woden. Unfortunately, his own name was pure Celtic/British (Coroticus?), as was that of his son, and so were several of his royal descendants. (Cynric is a great Celtic name meaning Hound-Lord, Cunorix). The fact of the British names is actually solid evidence that we might be dealing with real people, as the later Anglo-Saxons wouldn't have invented a founding king with such an alien name.

And that also gets us back to Friedman, who argues plausibly that no later Israelite would have invented a national hero like Moses, with a conspicuously Egyptian name, so therefore he was a real person, QED. Friedman also shows that many of the Levite characters in the Exodus stories bear Egyptian names, which none of their Israelite counterparts do. That in itself is very suggestive of a Levite/Egyptian linkage.

We have not a clue what language Cerdic (or his family) initially spoke, but some British and Celtic influence was definitely present. If that is the case, and Cerdic and Cynric were actually Celtic/British, it does raise questions about why they would need to invade Britain in the first place. Wouldn't they already be there? Why are the British invading Britain? Unless we are dealing with some kind of internal civil war, and one British/Celtic faction is trying to regain power after exile overseas, and maybe bringing some Germanic mercenaries along with them. But that is going way beyond the evidence…

For the later chroniclers, though, these questions do not arise. In the historical record as we have it, Cerdic's people are unquestionably Germanic conquistadors taking over the land from the decadent British Celts.

In pre-modern times, histories and chronicles tended to be highly partisan, and reflected the interests of the people patronizing the work. Such histories tended to focus on ruling families and dynasties, rather than the people as a whole. And they wrote to back-project later realities into ancient times, and to justify them. Over time, those histories come to be established as a nation's official story – and often, the only story that survives. Newcomers can thus bring their distinctive memories with them, and project them onto a larger community.

Something like that Wessex model is exactly what Friedman is proposing for the Exodus phenomenon. It also works very well in many other European and Asian contexts that I have encountered.

The core lesson then: never forget that the historical account might well be describing what the ruling dynasty did, not the people at large. If you wrote the history, you owned it.

Incidentally, the historical novelist Alfred Duggan published a brilliantly cynical, and funny, account of Cerdic in his classic *The Conscience of the King*. Anything by Duggan is w0rth reading.

A Lost Century, and a Slipped Date

November 17, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I have posted often at this site on the subject of the "Dark Ages," or post-Roman era, and specifically as it affected the British Isles following the Fall of Rome. (And yes, I do accept and use the concept of Dark Ages, and have justified my use of the term at some length). The era has multiple appeal for historians, not least because of the whole Arthurian myth, and the relation between history and legend; but also the fate of Christianity in a failed and failing state. This is a classic example where flourishing Christian communities were obliterated, and generally forgotten. That in itself justifies the focus on British conditions. Finally, it is fascinating to see what was happening in this corner of the world at the time of all those Eastern Christian religious controversies that I have published on in books like my *Jesus Wars*.

In Britain, the darkest of the Dark Ages is the fifth century AD, the era following the official withdrawal of Roman power in 410. At the start of that era, most of what we today call England and Wales was Roman in culture and civilization, advanced economically and quite prosperous. By the end of the century, standards of living and culture had collapsed, and much of the territory was under the control of pagan barbarians, mainly the Germanic Anglo-Saxons, but also the Irish. How the change happened is open to enormous debate, as our sources are pathetically limited. But I actually learned a lot about the workings of history – and of interpreting texts – from one specific story, that I will tell here, and in some detail. It offers a useful warning for reading history, in terms of what contemporaries do and don't know about the recent past.

The main early source we have for this period is the work of the British monk Gildas, who wrote *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain) around 540. Gildas was not a historian by intent, but that certainly does not invalidate the information he gives us. It is absurd to argue that we should not believe Gildas because he is writing a religious tract. Should we discredit every medieval source that describes miracles? When we listen to a sermon today, we may think it is a rant, but it often contains some accurate facts: few preachers are so ill-informed that they can't even name the last couple of presidents. The preacher may hold wild and wonderful views about gay rights or immigration (say) but we can still quote them to show that these were topics of lively interest in the period under discussion. You can use such polemical sources, but with all due allowance for their biases. We extract what information we can.

Gildas tells the story of Roman Britain, and he makes plenty of howlers. His material gets very interesting indeed when he moves into the fifth century, because he is telling us about an era where virtually nothing else survives. He specifically tells us about a series of disasters faced by the British people – wars, invasions, plagues – followed by eras of recovery, before the cycle begins again. His story goes like this:

1.*The First Crisis*

The Romans leave. There are brutal invasions by the Picts and Scots, from what we today call Scotland and Ireland. Plagues and famines run riot.

2.*Enter the Anglo-Saxons*

The British then secure victory over the Picts and Scots, but misgovernment and corruption run riot. Fearing future attacks, a proud tyrant, a *tyrannus* decides to call in Germanic mercenaries to protect against those enemies, a very common tactic in the late Roman world. These Germans do what they have been asked to do, but they in turn become a deadly enemy.

3.*The Second Crisis*

The Anglo-Saxons rebel, alleging that they had not been given the supplies and rewards they had been promised. (Again, this was a very common feature of late Roman life). They undertake a near total destruction of Roman society – they massacre, they destroy cities, people starve, to the extent that many try to give themselves up to the Anglo-Saxons as slaves in the hope of surviving. Others flee abroad.

4.*Revival and Recovery*

The British stage a revival under various figures, most celebrated among whom was Ambrosius Aurelianus. They confine the Anglo-Saxons to eastern regions of the country, and Gildas operates in a political world that is British – that is, Roman or sub-Roman, Christian, and Celtic.

The story as it goes is feasible in broad outline (which certainly does not mean it is necessarilytrue), but Gildas is phobic about giving dates. Only once does he quote what is unquestionably a contemporary source, which is among the very few precious words to survive to us from the last days of truly Roman, Latin, Britain. Facing existential disasters, British leaders address a desperate plea for help to the powerful Gallo-Roman general Aetius, who they address as "thrice consul." That dates the letter precisely to 446 AD. The letter then describes the horrible circumstances the British face: "the barbarians drive us to the sea, the sea drives us upon the barbarians; by one or other of these two modes of death we are either killed or drowned; and for these they have no aid." Gildas here is unquestionably quoting a genuine document, with a precise date, and as such, this is pure gold.

But here is the problem. Gildas has a narrative, and he has the one golden treasure of a datable document. So where does he put it? If you read his tract, then he inserts the document between

points 1 and 2 above, after the defeat of the Picts and Scots. Hence, that must have happened around 446. Then the Anglo-Saxons came in. Not coincidentally, Anglo-Saxon tradition dated the arrival of their people in Britain in 449, the "Coming of the Saxons." For centuries, those dates enjoyed a kind of consecrated status in English historical writing.

Many years ago, I attended the lectures of the great Anglo-Saxon scholar Peter Hunter Blair, who made a brilliant point that should have been glaringly obvious. Briefly, what Gildas has is just impossible, if you take the dates literally. Far, far, too much happens between 446 and 449, between the Appeal to Aetius and the Coming of the Saxons: we are talking the happenings of decades, not of a couple of years. So here is an alternative view: Gildas has the wrong crisis. What Gildas had to go on was a highly rhetorical Appeal roughly a century before his time, in an era of desperate crisis and near collapse provoked by barbarian invasions, and sadly, there were at least a couple of candidates for such a catastrophic time.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that Gildas simply put the dated document in the wrong place, to match up with the wrong crisis. And also, that he chose the wrong enemies, who were the Anglo-Saxons, not the Picts and Scots. In that case, the Appeal to Aetius would belong in the crisis depths described at the end of **Point 3 above**, and only there. Once we make that shift, the logical and chronological difficulties vanish, and the sequence of events works in a way it could not otherwise. Not only that, but the revised chronology meshes perfectly with one of the very few other solidly dated pieces of contemporary evidence that we possess. Everything falls into place.

It is overwhelmingly likely that Gildas has misplaced the document, and the circumstances it describes, by twenty years. To use a modern analogy, it is like someone today finding a cryptic letter about Allied soldiers fighting the Germans in the Ardennes, puzzling over it, and eventually deciding that it belongs in 1914 rather than 1944. In a pre-Google age, such errors were all too easy. Based on that slip about Aetius, post-Gildas historians constructed a whole bogus chronology that lingered until modern times.

With that change in mind, let's tell that whole story again, but with plausible dates and some editorial insertions. The sequence works very well indeed, and so does the chronology:

1. *The First Crisis*

In 410, the Romans withdraw their protection from Britain. There are brutal invasions by the Picts and Scots, and plagues and famines run riot. Probably in the 420s, the island is wracked by warfare. The *Life* of a Gaulish saint named Germanus of Auxerre records him visiting Britain around 429, and intervening miraculously to help the Christian British defeat the Picts and their Saxon allies. Incidentally, Germanus's visit suggests a deeply Christian society, at least at elite level, where society was deeply split between orthodox believers and Pelagians. Christianity was developing real local roots.

2. *Enter the Anglo-Saxons*

The British secured victory over the Picts and Scots, but misgovernment and corruption run riot. Probably in the late 420s, fearing future attacks, a *tyrannus* decided to call in Germanic mercenaries to defend against future enemies. This *tyrannus* was probably named Vortigern or Vertigernus, who

features in later folklore in a sinister light. It is likely that Gildas originally named Vortigern in his writing, but that the name dropped out in later versions.

Through the 430s, the Germans settle and perform military tasks for the British, and they are presumably given military control over large sections of the eastern parts of the country. The Germanic presence in the country was far from new at this time (witness the force defeated by Germanus in 429, not to mention the forts of the "Saxon Shore"), but this might have been on a larger and more organized scale. In itself, using barbarian forces in this way was neither new and controversial, and Aetius himself made extensive and quite successful use of multiple ethnic groups, often settling them on lands within the empire.

3.*The Second Crisis*

Around 440, the Anglo-Saxons rebel, alleging that they had not been given the supplies and rewards they had been promised. They undertake a near total destruction of Roman society – they massacre, they destroy cities, people starve, to the extent that many try to give themselves up to the Anglo-Saxons in the hope of surviving. Others flee abroad, including to what we now call Brittany, "Little Britain."

Several things help confirm this dating. One is a near-contemporary entry in a *Gallic Chronicle*, which under the year 441 notes that "The British provinces, which to this time had suffered various defeats and misfortunes, are reduced to Saxon rule." Or another variant from a Gallic source at this time, "Britain, abandoned by the Romans, passed into the power of the Saxons." I have no idea how the Gallic writers are assessing this, but s*omething* happens in 441, something dramatic or ugly enough to attract attention across the Channel. (Like everything else in this era, that *Chronicle* entry has of course been multiply assailed).

This entry concerns an *event* of some kind, not a general trend, and not a generalized state of warfare and chaos. It looks like a datable moment of transition. Was it a decisive military victory, followed by a proclamation of a new kingdom? Was it a Germanic coup, a putsch to grab control of some leading fortresses? Was it an organized massacre of native elites? For what it is worth, much later legends suggested something like the last of these possibilities, with the Anglo-Saxons betraying and killing British leaders at a great meeting ostensibly called to create peace.

And then, in 446, we have the firmly dated appeal to Aetius – also in Gaul.

Less certain in date, but probably from this time, is the incredible hoard of Roman treasure found in Hoxne, in Suffolk, in 1992. Apart from stunning quantities of gold and silver items, the hoard included some fifteen thousand Roman coins, running in date to around 410. However, the coins had been clipped and used in other ways since that date, suggesting a gap of some decades before they were buried, and a date around 440 would work well. We have no idea who buried the treasure, whether it was a very rich family, or (less likely) a band of Germanic raiders who had raided such a family, and was hiding loot. What we do know is that they – whoever *they* were – never came back to collect this vast treasure, suggesting that they were dead, exiled, or otherwise incapacitated. That suggests the deep chaos of the time, and probably the elimination of the old landed elites. Ambrosius's own family had been killed in the wars.

Hoards of this kind are particularly likely to appear in eastern England and East Anglia, exactly the regions most likely to be hit by Anglo-Saxon raiding. Hoards can in some circumstances represent deliberate ritual deposits, but in the context of the age, they are much more likely to be the remnants of a shattered society seeking desperately to preserve its goods.

Gildas paints a terrifying picture of what must be the 440s:

For the fire of righteous vengeance, caused by former crimes, blazed from sea to sea, heaped up by the eastern band of impious men; and as it devastated all the neighboring cities and lands, did not cease after it had been kindled, until it burnt nearly the whole surface of the island, and licked the western ocean with its red and savage tongue. … In this way were all the settlements brought low with the frequent shocks of the battering rams; the inhabitants, along with the bishops of the church, both priests and people, whilst swords gleamed on every side and flames crackled, were together mown down to the ground, and, sad sight! there were seen in the midst of streets, the bottom stones of towers with tall beam cast down, and of high walls, sacred altars, fragments of bodies covered with clots, as if coagulated, of red blood, in confusion as in a kind of horrible wine press: there was no sepulture [burial] *of any kind save the ruins of houses, or the entrails of wild beasts and birds in the open … Some of the wretched remnant were consequently captured on the mountains and killed in heaps. Others, overcome by hunger, came and yielded themselves to the enemies, to be their slaves for ever, if they were not instantly slain, which was equivalent to the highest service. Others repaired to parts beyond the sea, with strong lamentation… Others, trusting their lives, always with apprehension of mind, to high hills, overhanging, precipitous, and fortified, and to dense forests and rocks of the sea, remained in their native land, though with fear.*

This is not based on first hand observation, and the text strongly recalls Biblical exemplars, such as Jeremiah. Also, Gildas may not be describing the universal experience of the whole of southern Britain, but he is surely recalling traditions of wars and massacres in particular regions.

Obviously, no contemporary British account survives to tell us of the misery experienced by those forced to flee their communities, facing the hourly danger of massacre, rape, or mass enslavement. Oddly, though, we do have exactly such a first hand account from these very years, from the region of what we would call Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia. The Life of Saint Severinus describes just such a crisis of war and invasion, and the destruction of the Roman provinces of Noricum and Pannonia in the 450s. Among other things, it is a great pioneering work of the refugee experience. Every agonized word should be read carefully by British historian of the post-Roman era, especially those who tend to minimize the barbarian incursions.

To put this all in wider context, Augustine of Hippo died in 430, shortly before his city fell to the Vandals (Germanic barbarians), following a brutal siege and mass starvation. He would have sympathized powerfully with the plight of his fellow Romans in Britain. This is also the most intense era of the "Jesus Wars" in the Eastern Empire, with the Council of Ephesus in 431, and the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The year 451 also witnessed Aetius's victory over Attila the Hun.

4.*Revival and Recovery*

The British stage a revival under various warlord figures, most celebrated among whom was Ambrosius Aurelianus. This would have been chiefly in the 450s and 460s, leading to decisive battles like the siege of Mons Badonicus, Mount Badon, around the 490s. British armies confined the

Anglo-Saxons to eastern regions of the country, and Gildas operates in a political world that is chiefly British – that is, Roman or sub-Roman, Christian, and Celtic.

The Anglo-Saxons did not of course vanish , and they won sweeping victories from the mid-sixth century onward. Making their advances immensely easier were the after-effects of the great plague that raged across Europe in the 540s, which approached the destructive levels of the later Black Death. In 577, the West Saxons finally captured the old Roman heartland in and around Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester, which two centuries before had been the core of the wealthy rural villa society.

In several other blogs, I have discussed the impact of these various wars and disasters on Britain, and the transition to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that emerge in the early middle ages. At least some of the Anglo-Saxon leaders were interbred with British elites, and I have described elsewhere how the kingdom of Wessex owed its foundation to some kings with [suspiciously British Celtic names](#). Contrary to some historians, though, I definitely believe that many or most non-elite British people did suffer a [disastrous decline in prestige and wealth](#), as indicated by the [near disappearance of their language](#) from most of what became England. They did not all wake up one morning and decide to start speaking Anglo-Saxon, as a means to social mobility. (This is sometime called the elite emulation model).

I get somewhat frustrated when I read modern accounts suggesting that Roman Britain collapsed pretty much of its own accord, and the Anglo-Saxons were some kind of marginal later migration picking up the pieces. Um, and what language are these modern historical narratives written in? A linguistic descendant of British Latin? No, they are in English, a language with virtually no British Celtic loan words. (All the Latin loanwords are from much later eras, after the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity). That does suggest a whopping transfer of population and cultures, does it not? Or put another way, a catastrophe, and a tectonic event of ethnic replacement and subjugation.

Normally, too, such revisionist accounts simply ignore the sparse literary evidence we do have for the era, because it does not fit their assumptions. You simply can't do that. Like it or not, Gildas – to take the best known example – is there, it exists, and it can't be ignored. So are priceless items like the *Gallic Chronicle,* the *Appeal to Aetius,* and the *Life of Germanus.* They all speak of defeat, disaster and massacre.

Reinforcing that impression of catastrophe is the genetic evidence that has emerged over the past decade or so, and especially the study of the Y chromosome passed on in the male line. This suggests a heavy predominance of Anglo-Saxons in the later English gene pool, at the expense of British-Celtic men, who stood very little chance of passing on their genes. Obviously, that turnover was much more marked in some areas than others, but according to some interpretations, around a million British men alive around 400 failed to leave an enduring genetic legacy. British-Celtic women, in contrast, did survive in large numbers, but at humble levels of status.

Furthermore, Christianity survived in eastern England, it [was in a very marginal way](#).

If large British-Celtic minorities did survive in the new Anglo-Saxon world, we have to find some way to explain the linguistic transformation. Some modern scholars have suggested that the two races existed in a kind of apartheid relationship.

A large scholarly literature on Britain in this era points to the impact of multiple factors quite apart from the new invaders, including famine, plague, and climate change, and each contributed to the systematic crisis. Economic dislocation played a critical role, with the collapse of the coinage-based economy, and the evaporation of the Roman Army in Britain as a source of demand. As much as the famous barbarians who invaded and occupied territory, nautical pirates made the sea routes impossible and seized Roman treasure ships, grabbing the money that should have paid the legions. That contributed powerfully to severing Britain from the empire, and to the ensuing economic collapse. All these factors played their cumulative part, and created a perfect storm: this is what Dark Ages are all about. Each of these elements would in its way contribute to a demographic crisis, and a general collapse of populations.

None of those factors, in my view, was as significant as the incessant cycle of wars and invasions, which would have contributed overwhelmingly to economic collapse, the disruption of food production, and widespread depopulation. To that extent, Gildas had his narrative priorities exactly right.

Next time, I will discuss the warlord societies that emerged out of these disastrous conditions, and how they supplied the context for the creation of emerging British and Irish Christianity.

As I post quite a bit in these late Roman/post Roman topics, it might be useful to share my working bibliography, which you can find here.

Warlords, War-bands, and Saints

November 24, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Last time, I talked about the collapse of the old Roman order in Britain in the fifth century, and what we can reliably say about such an obscure period with so few written sources. (Although it is not a fashionable term, I do use the concept of the Dark Age, properly defined). For historians of Christianity, this is a matter of some moment because out of this world comes the whole world of the Celtic church of Britain and Ireland, with its titanic saints and scholars. These developments would be so important in building the spiritual and intellectual world of the Middle Ages, and reshaping the Christian West.

Collapse

I described the general crisis of the mid-fifth century, with accumulating horrors of plague, famine, invasion, war and massacre. We may well wonder how people could even survive in these appalling

circumstances, and how they could possibly reconstruct the old society they had known. The answer is that they just could not reconstruct, and did not. In modern times, survivors of catastrophe rebuild their cities and try to restore their economies, but that was simply not conceivable in this ancient time, given the rupture with old Roman patterns and trade routes. Even the coinage system no longer functioned, beyond what old Roman coins could be recycled, and that killed both trade and the artisanship on which it depended. Military threats and raids made it impossible to reoccupy the cities in anything like their old sense. Endemic plagues made urban life all the more inconceivable.

Some modern archaeology has pointed to fifth century habitation of some Roman cities. We can argue whether this was truly urban life, or whether some groups happened to have chosen a former urban site as a home, or even a fortress. In most cases, we can doubt whether urban life in any classical sense continued beyond 440. (But see below for one great exception or modification to this statement).

Generals and Warlords

During the fifth century, then, we see a radical shift in social organization, towards a world based above all on military values. The key idea was that of the warlord, and the war-band. As, by definition, this change happened in a world with little bureaucracy and few written records, it is hard to trace reliably beyond a plausible sketch. A man or family emerged as a distinguished war-leader, and he might have come from either Roman or barbarian backgrounds. (I have blogged elsewhere about the idea of the warlord, as it appears in countless societies throughout history).

The warlord secured a reliable fortified place, perhaps within one of the old cities, or more likely, a restored hill-fortress originally constructed in the Iron Age, of the sort that proliferated around Britain. He gathered around him a force of devoted followers, founded on principles of absolute personal loyalty, and espousing a code of military-based honor and good lordship. But followers also needed to be constantly rewarded by gifts, of money, treasure, or slaves. That demanded constant conflict and mutual aggression.

I quote the opinion of archaeologist Tony Wilmott, describing the situation in the Roman forts along Hadrian's Wall, centers like Birdoswald (probably Roman Banna):

At Birdoswald, I would argue that the only change in the early 5th century was that the troops of the fort were no longer paid or supplied by central authority. The unit was still there, however, and … I suggest that the old system of official coercion might have been replaced by a symbiosis, whereby the territory from which supplies had been drawn as part of the Roman tax system continued to sustain the fort in return for the assurance of protection in troubled times. It may be that the kind of commander-patronus attested by the large commanders' houses in the late forts continued to be an important figure as the 5th century went on. These men may have been of sufficient influence to become imperceptibly more like chieftains in control of warbands than Roman commanders. Such an idea would explain the use of the hall as a centre to the settlement. Birdoswald may have become the centre of a small petty kingdom indistinguishable from others with totally different antecedents north of the Wall, or to the west of Britain.

In describing these warlords, I offer the Wikipedia definition:

A warlord is a person who has both military and civil control over a sub-national area due to the presence of armed forces who are loyal to the warlord rather than to a central authority. … [In a modern context] Warlordism frequently appears in failed states, states in which central government and nationwide authorities have collapsed or exist merely formally without actual control over the state territory. They are usually defined by a high level of clientelism, low bureaucratic control, and a high motivation to prolong war for the maintenance of their economic system.

I say nothing about the ethnic origins of particular warbands, and if late Roman history was any guide, most fighting forces would have been extremely mixed, ethnically and linguistically. I doubt if warfare between British and Anglo-Saxon statelets or forces followed anything like modern national and nationalist lines – although Gildas certainly suggests deep racial/national hostility against the Germanic invaders.

Depending on the ethnic or cultural background of the particular society, individual warlords might aspire to more exalted titles, whether Roman or barbarian, royal or even imperial. Conceivably, some might have tried to restore the old pre-Roman tribal states and tribal hierarchies. Some writers believe this, but it is an open question.

The relationship between legitimate and illegitimate authority is a very vexed question, and one that is quite insoluble given our present knowledge. In some cases, warlords might have been adventurers or glorified bandits. In others, they might have held some authority from existing institutions, even as kings in their own right. Perhaps some boasted some Roman title legally obtained, as *protector* or *magister militum*. Kings might have acted like warlords, and vice versa. Over time, successful warlords might have become legitimate kings and founded dynasties. Others flamed out and vanished.

The Case of Wroxeter

One of the classic archaeological sites of the era is at Wroxeter, the old Roman city of Viroconium, once the fourth largest town of Roman Britain. It sheds fascinating light on the processes described here. By the fifth century, the Roman city was finished in its old urban sense, but it developed a whole new life that we can only begin to understand. For a while, the basilica and bath-house were used as a grain store, but things then changed with a "great rebuilding" in the century or so after 450. The basilica was renovated, and many new timber structures were built, largely following Roman models.

Critically, there appeared an impressive hall, likewise following the old Roman styles, and complete with a portico, but again, built in timber. It is a classic illustration of the idea of Dark Age survival on Classical foundations. It was probably also the last Classical building erected in England before the Renaissance. But what should we call this? A neo-Roman fortress? A medieval hall? A Welsh chieftain's *llys* (hall)? Even Arthur's Camelot itself? (And yes, I'm sort of kidding about that last one). On a personal note, I recall being at a lecture in Cambridge c.1971 where Philip Barker, head of the Wroxeter excavation team, was describing that hall and some of the early discoveries from the site. The audience of archaeology faculty and students was stunned. The room was so quiet you could have heard a paradigm drop.

Also making Wroxeter radically different from other sites were the methods by which archaeologists had explored it, techniques that now sound very standard, but which were quite revolutionary in the

1960s. In earlier times, archaeologists would come to a Roman city, designate a limited area, and dig trenches, carefully noting and recording the finds at each stratum they came to. You could then reconstruct the floor plans of the buildings, and connect them by a process not unlike the game of Battleships. Wroxeter was different, because of a preference for what we might call breadth over depth. The excavators here did not dig trenches, but instead stripped the top layers over a very large surface. They noted finds, and then stripped the next surface below that, and so on. Let's call it the lasagne approach. In consequence, they were able to identify long lost surface markings that otherwise would have gone wholly unnoticed, including the light footprint of timber houses, and in one case, the track of the last cart that would have crossed a dirt road some 1500 years ago. That allowed scholars to see the final phase of Roman Wroxeter in a way that would have been wholly lost otherwise.

So a question arises. As we have it, Wroxeter looks quite unique on the post-Roman map, but is that just because of the archaeological process applied here? Suppose that such methods had been applied to other cities like Cirencester, or York, or St. Albans, or even London? Even to make that remark points to the futility of the question. Of course you could not, as those towns have been reused intensively for centuries, in a way that would utterly destroy all those light features hiding just below the surface. The Wroxeter excavation was possible only because it did not become a thriving later city.

So were the post-Roman town and "hall" at Wroxeter unique in Britain, or would something like that have existed at every Roman town around 500 or so, maybe including London itself? We can never know.

Just who restored the site at Wroxeter, and lived in that hall, and what was his status? Would this have been a king or tyrannus? Again for what they are worth (a phrase I will use repeatedly), according to the Welsh genealogies, Vortigern's own family had connections with the region. Alternatively, around 540, Gildas names five kings or tyrants, and if they are named in some kind of geographical order, as many think, then that would logically place a king called Cuneglassus roughly in the Wroxeter area. But we honestly don't know.

Power and Ideology

Whoever the new elites were, their aspirations and pretensions were reinforced by every possible means of symbolic power – in clothing, buildings, adornments, weaponry, funeral arrangements, and especially the praise of literary figures, of poets, bards, and genealogists. Think of it as early medieval soft power. Display might be formalized in special gatherings, and a culture of feasting. Imported treasures carried a special symbolic weight, in showing [the global context in which the warlord operated](). From the fifth century through the seventh, we regularly find sites across the British Isles marked by the possession of imported Mediterranean pottery, and sometimes coins. Most were the residences of warlords and chieftains, but others were monasteries or episcopal centers.

One author on the British warlords in this era is Stuart Laycock, who was inspired by his observations of the Balkan crisis he witnessed as an aid worker in the 1990s. That might indeed offer some instructive analogies.

Among the many things we do not know about the various warlords is the geographical scale on which they operated. If you had a lord in Wroxeter, say, how far afield might he have operated? In modern terminology, how far could he project his power? We can draw some telling lessons from later eras. We have well-documented evidence about the 630s, and the struggles among three leading kingdoms: Mercia in the English Midlands, Northumbria in northern England and southern Scotland, and Gwynedd in north west Wales. The kings of each realm marauded freely over its rivals, and armies traveled far across middle and northern parts of Britain, fighting battles deep inside enemy territory. In the 680s, a Northumbrian king used ships to raid Ireland, and launched an invasion deep into Scotland. It is likely that warlords of the 480s (say) would have been just as mobile and interventionist, especially as the old Roman infrastructure of forts, roads, ports, and way-stations would have been far more intact than it was in the seventh century.

Rulers of that earlier time must also have had good access to shipping, because that is the means by which many Celtic British migrated overseas to what became Brittany. Those pan-British Isles, pan-Insular, dimensions would be critical to understanding the spread and flourishing of Christianity across Britain and Ireland (and Brittany) over the following two centuries.

The Age of Warlords

With that warlord model in mind, I turn back to the story of the fifth century crisis as told by Gildas. He describes the general crisis and horrors of the 440s, followed – very surprisingly – by a major restoration of British/Roman military power, led by figures like Ambrosius Aurelianus. This revival would have occurred between (say) 450 and 480, culminating in the decisive defeat and containment of Germanic forces at the end of the century. The warlord/warband structure might well have been emerging long before that, but would have been constrained by the survival of sub-Roman political structures, and urban-based institutions. After the 440s, the model would have come into full flower.

It was during that time that some ambitious king or general felt the situation was stable enough to invest in building a whole new settlement within the site of old Roman Wroxeter.

Gildas is very sparse on the historical names that he cites, mainly because they are not germane to his purpose. But we can identify some other successful British warlords at this time. One of the oddest stories concerns the British general Riothamus, who around 468 actually led forces to support the Roman Empire in the West, by invading Gaul and fighting the Goths. The [Gothic historian Jordanes](#) wrote that "Euric, king of the Visigoths, perceived the frequent change of Roman Emperors and strove to hold Gaul by his own right. The Emperor Anthemius heard of it and asked the Brittones for aid. Their King Riotimus [Riothamus] came with twelve thousand men into the state of the Bituriges by the way of Ocean, and was received as he disembarked from his ships." The campaign was a disaster, but the fact of organizing and launching it is an impressive tribute to some kind of British recovery – not to mention the possible survival of Roman values and ideologies.

Undoubtedly historical, Riothamus surfaces in some theories as one prototype of King Arthur, although Ambrosius might also have contributed something to that image. Personally, I favor the idea of a separate historical Arthur, if only on the basis of his unusual Roman name.

At least in later legend, Arthur was associated with a particular battle that I would now be more confident about dating than in previous years – which is not necessarily to say it had anything to do

with Arthur. [As I have noted before](#), Gildas writes of a decisive victory over the Saxons at Mons Badonicus, which later chronicles associate with Arthur. Reputedly, "Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights and the Britons were victors." Gildas also offers a date for this triumph, which has something to do with 44 years. Unfortunately the text of this passage is clearly corrupt. A reasonable consensus is that Gildas originally said something like that the battle occurred 44 years previously, and he knows this very well because that was the year he was born. But 44 years before what?

Scholar [David Woods](#) has argued that Gildas is referring to a great dark cloud over the land, which he took to be an apocalyptic sign or portent. That meshes well with a [real recorded historical event](#), namely a volcanic cloud that [crossed the earth](#) in 536-537. Assuming that this is correct, then that is the point at which Gildas was writing, and that 44 years before that would place Mons Badonicus in 493. *If* that is correct, that gives us one of the extremely rare hard dates that we possess for major political events in fifth/sixth century Britain.

To get an impression of events and conflicts in the larger Western world in the 490s, look at the career of [the Roman Emperor of the time](#), Anastasius.

Besides Arthur, other curious names surface in odd corners of histories and chronicles, where they point to long-lost legends. In one Welsh source, we hear almost out of nowhere that likely in the 460s or 470s, Ambrosius Aurelianus struggled against one Guitholin at a place called Guoloph, which is apparently Wallop, in southern England. Twelve years after the reign of Vortigern, one very Roman-named figure was thus fighting another: Guitholin is the same as Vitalinus. We have no good idea where these stories are coming from, nor why they seemed so important to the particular chronicler, Nennius. But he regards this battle as a turning point worthy to be used as a milestone for dating other key events. For what it is worth, plenty of legends suggest strong rivalry between the families of Ambrosius and Vortigern, and the name Vitalinus appears in Vortigern's genealogy. Perhaps Ambrosius was fighting a family faction loyal to his predecessor. Different scholars vary enormously on how far they treat these events as historical, and even more so in the dates they assign them.

Patrick's Foe

One other British warlord figure was Coroticus, who is usually associated with the fortress of Dumbarton, in modern Scotland. Probably in the 450s, he organized a raid on Ireland, resulting in many deaths and the taking of slaves. We happen to know about this because his victims included Christian converts and followers of [the British missionary Patrick](#), who denounced Coroticus in [furious words](#) that are among the very few original texts that survive from the British Isles during this whole century. Significantly, the worst charge that Patrick can levy against Coroticus is that he is no Roman, an insult that only makes sense if the warlord claimed to follow Roman values.

By the time we get to Gildas's own time, in the mid-sixth century, we have a list of kings and kingdoms, though the dividing lines between warlords and kings in any more respectable sense is hard to trace.

Patrick's bitter relationship with Coroticus suggests one form of church-state interaction – or rather, saint to warlord. I'll expand on this, as a means of approaching the early medieval church, and especially in its Celtic forms.

I have posted my working bibliography here.

Reinventing Christianity After Rome

December 11, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have been posting about the collapse of Roman society in Britain in the fifth century AD, and the rise of what we often call "Dark Age" societies – impoverished, war-torn, deurbanized, depopulated. In Christian history, this change is so important because of the accompanying revolution in religious structures, the evaporation of the old Roman dioceses and hierarchies, and the emergence of new tribal kingdoms and warlord statelets. It is out of that new reality that we see the growth of the Celtic church, which played such a critical role in conserving ancient learning, and spreading their vigorous form of the faith across Western Europe.

I have often posted before on these topics: on the issue of religious decline, the failure of the Roman state, and the emergence of new religious landscapes, not to mention legendary individual saints such as Patrick, Colmcille, Finnian, Illtud, and others. I won't try to write a history of the Celtic churches here, but instead will focus on a couple of major points. What difference did it make that the old Roman urban order vanished?

Discussions of the Celtic church normally focus on Irish conditions and events, but the overlap with affairs in Western Britain was very close, from the time of Patrick onwards. The Irish church venerated British figures like Gildas, who I have been writing about at some length. It really mattered, then, what that British church was like.

The British church is a rare example of an institution that began with a Roman urban framework, but then transitioned away to new forms as the cities fell apart. This made them so unlike the framework we see in other former Roman territories like Gaul, Italy, or Spain. In those countries, the bishops served as the vital points of continuity from ancient times, and (generally) ensured that the old Roman cities and towns continued into the Middle Ages, usually with their names more or less intact – and that despite all the economic dislocation, and the frequent warfare. That in turn helped assure the continuity of the Latin language, which was best established in the cities. British bishops existed, but they necessarily relied on royal or tribal authorities, and that pattern was inherited by the Anglo-Saxons.

No bishop, no city, and vice versa.

The weakness of episcopal power in Britain contributed to the enormous upsurge of monasticism that we can trace in the sixth century, and which is so evident in the writings of Gildas in the 530s. That pattern emerged in Britain, and that in turn shaped the emerging church in Ireland, where there had never been cities to begin with. In the British Isles, monastic centers played the role that bishoprics played on the Continent, and by definition, they usually were not located in the old Roman cities. As I have argued before, though, British monasteries emerged too late to preserve much from the wreck of the old Roman order.

I am almost reluctant to frame this in such definitive terms, but I propose a Three Mile Rule, which I think is my own invention. Find an early ecclesiastical center, a major monastery or episcopal seat, and very frequently, it is around three miles from the key royal center or fortress in the area. The religious leaders were thus located close enough to the kings to be a constant presence, and to benefit from their military protection, but not so close as to be absolutely under secular thumbs. Think of it as around an hour's walk. Time for tempers to cool down after a particularly fraught exchange….

There are literally dozens of examples of this in Britain and Ireland, but the classic double is Bamburgh Castle, the center of the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, and Lindisfarne or Holy Island. The historic fortress of the most powerful kings of north Wales in the sixth century was at Aberffraw in Angelesy, about two miles from the royal church/monastery of Llangadwaladr. The great royal seat of the northern part of Ireland was at Emain Macha, less than three miles from the monastery of Armagh, which claimed the inheritance of St. Patrick. If you stretch the distance to five miles, then you have possible doubles like Wroxeter (a Roman city and early medieval fortress) and the historic church at Sutton.

One intriguing duo appears in South Wales, just west of the powerful old Roman fortress of Cardiff. The main Dark Age center here was the reoccupied Celtic hill fort of Dinas Powys, and 2 1/2 miles east of that is the fascinating site of Llandough (Llandochwy), one of the few probable British cases where an old Roman villa likely transformed into an early medieval monastery. This is speculation, but did a villa-owning elite family move to a defensible fortress, while ceding the family home to a monastery? Around four miles from Dinas Powys stands another ancient ecclesiastical site, at Llandaff. (I have already written about another Welsh villa/monastery parallel from this era, quite nearby at Llantwit Major).

Often, the religious part of the double survived and flourished into the Middle Ages and beyond (witness the diocesan centers at Llandaff and Armagh) while the once vastly more important royal fortress fell into oblivion, until recovered by modern archaeologists.

It should also be said what did not happen in this transition, and the ensuing spread from Britain to Ireland. We know that early medieval Ireland had a dazzling range of ancient and Classical manuscripts and resources, which it subsequently transmitted to Europe. How natural, then, to think that these were preserved from Roman Britain, and then brought to Ireland. But they weren't. Roman Britain had probably never had these resources, and there is no sign that any of them survived the destruction and abandonment of the old cities and villas. Those Classical texts were imported afresh from the sixth century onwards.

What the new British-Irish world did retain from the older Roman environment was the trade routes to the Mediterranean, to North Africa and beyond to the Levant, and even Egypt, and that maritime route into the Irish Sea world survived probably into the eighth century. We find its remains in all the British royal and monastics sites recording imported Mediterranean pottery. These were not cities, but rather the new geography of power – or the fortresses of kings and chieftains, and the adjacent monasteries and churches, usually located far away from the old centers of Roman power. One of the most famous such sites was at Tintagel, in Cornwall, which plays so crucial a role in Arthurian mythology.

While the Anglo-Saxons looked across the North Sea, the British/Irish peoples still thought in terms of the Roman and Christian Mediterranean.

I have posted a rough working bibliography on all this.

Reading Caedmon at Christmas

December 25, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Christmas is at once a feast of Creation and Incarnation, as the two stories are so intimately integrated in the Prologue to John's Gospel. On Christmas Day, then, it seems appropriate to quote one of the great poems about the Creation, but this particular one has a special story attached to it. Not only is this a truly ancient poem, dating back some 1400 years, but it is regarded as one of the first literary works in the English language, and it is by the very first English author whose name we know. Here it is:

Now [we] must honor the guardian of heaven,

the might of the architect, and his purpose,

the work of the father of glory

as he, the eternal lord, established the beginning of wonders;

he first created for the children of men

heaven as a roof, the holy creator

Then the guardian of mankind,

the eternal lord, afterwards appointed the middle earth,

the lands for men, the Lord almighty.

Those opening words – *Nū scylun hergan hefaenrīcaes uard* – mark the beginning of English Christian culture. In more senses than one, this poem marks a new creation.

But beyond its ancient character, the poem also touches on many other themes that I have explored recently in this blog, especially about how the old Roman province of Britain (Celtic and Christian) became the new Anglo-Saxon England (Germanic and pagan), with its radically different language. The story involves some genuinely surprising exchanges and crossovers.

The story begins with one Caedmon, who probably around the 660s was a humble lay-brother in the monastic house of Whitby in Yorkshire. This was then part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. The town is a wonderful tourist destination to this day, though the monastic ruins now play second fiddle to memories of Count Dracula, but that is a digression. Through an angelic vision, Caedmon was encouraged to compose Christian poetry in Anglo-Saxon, of which we have some samples. According to the historian Bede, Caedmon later ranged widely over the Bible:

He sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of Genesis, the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, their entrance into the promised land, and many other histories from Holy Scripture; the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection of our Lord, and His Ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the teaching of the Apostles; likewise he made many songs concerning the terror of future judgement, the horror of the pains of hell, and the joys of heaven; besides many more about the blessings and the judgements of God.

The story is famous, but what is surprising here is Caedmon's name, which is not Anglo-Saxon, but Celtic and British. I have discussed this before, but the familiar story of the fall of Roman Britain goes like this. The Anglo-Saxons invaded in the fifth century, the old British Celts were killed, conquered, or expelled – either overseas to Brittany, or else to the northern and western parts of Britain. The remaining Celtic British left virtually no trace on the English that developed in what became England, and that is a stark contrast to what happened in countries like France, Spain or Italy, where the invading Germans ended up speaking languages derived from the Latin of their subject peoples. (Just to reiterate that the British were Celtic and Roman, the English were Germanic – which is why it really annoys modern Brits when anyone refers to King Arthur as a ruler of the "English." It's like calling Sam Houston a famous Mexican).

Something different happened in Britain, though historians disagree exactly what that was, and why it occurred. Some think the British themselves adopted Anglo-Saxon because it was the language of their superiors, in a process that some call elite emulation. Others think the British were so despised and inferior that they existed in a kind of Germanic-dominated apartheid state, as existed in white-ruled South Africa, so their language was simply wiped out.

So here we have Caedmon, who appears to be a lower-class person lacking education, and Bede gives no suggestion that he was anything other than a regular Anglo-Saxon by race or language. But look at his name. It is identical with the Celtic name Catamanus, or its later Welsh version Cadfan, and there were some very famous British incumbents of that name around this time.

By far the most significant was one Catamanus who ruled the powerful north Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd from his fortress on the island of Anglesey. Although we know little about his rule or character, we have a grave memorial erected on his death around 625, and it is stunning. It commemorates "*Catamanus rex sapientisimus opinatisimus omnium regum*" (King Catamanus, wisest and

most renowned of all kings). These titles sound like they had come straight from the flowery diplomatic language of the Byzantine empire (after making due allowance for translation from that empire's Greek). Very likely, the language does reflect links between Celtic Britain and the Empire around that time, as indicated by the presence of Mediterranean pottery and trade objects in British excavations. This is pure speculation, but did the phraseology actually come from the pen of some Byzantine official trying to establish contact with kings on the distant periphery of what had once been the Western Roman Empire? Did that inscription start as the opening of a diplomatic letter? I have written elsewhere about British/Mediterranean ties in precisely this era, when Welsh kings named their sons after the contemporary Byzantine emperor Maurice.

I do make one suggestion. In the later sixth century, the Byzantine Empire had close relations with the Merovingian Frankish dynasty in Gaul, and as allies of the emperor Maurice, the Franks repeatedly invaded Italy to fight the Lombards. But the Franks were becoming too powerful in their own right, and definitely had their own ambitions in Italy and the larger Mediterranean world. As a counterweight, it is quite likely that the Byzantines should have sought allies against the Franks in the closely linked territories of western Britain and Brittany, so a diplomatic venture here too is plausible. This would have been very standard operating procedures for an empire seeking to influence matters far beyond its frontiers. If Byzantine envoys could dabble in the affairs of what we now call France, why not Britain?

Catamanus was succeeded by his son, Cadwallon, who may have been the one who erected that flowery tablet. In the 630s he went on to win an astonishing victory against the mighty English kingdom of Northumbria. Again according to Bede, he was not content just to annex the land, but he fought a genocidal race war, and made a systematic attempt to exterminate its Anglo-Saxon peoples. Cadwallon was finally defeated and killed in 634 at a battle fought near Hadrian's Wall.

But to get back to Caedmon. The Celtic name must mean that he came from that British ancestry, as it is inconceivable that an Anglo-Saxon family might have chosen the name out of an imaginary Celtic baby book. This was simply not an age when families named their children after contemporary celebrities, and certainly not ones from rival neighboring states. (Don't tell me about William Tecumseh Sherman).

We might go further and suggest that Caedmon's family must have fallen dramatically in status. Celtic names beginning with *Cata-* (war or battle) generally imply aristocratic or royal status, as in the case of kings Catamanus (Battle Horse), or Cadwallon (originally *Katuwellaunos* or Battle Leader). So why do we find the name Caedmon held by a lowly lay brother and cow herd? Might he or his family have come to Northumbria as a war prisoner or hostage? Or was he from the local Celtic peoples in Yorkshire? We just don't know.

Also interesting is just *when* he received his name. What little we know of Caedmon is that he was well on in years before he received his poetic gift. In the context of the time, that could mean (say) forty years, but that would virtually certainly mean that he was born in the time of the famous king Catamanus. Was he even named after him, maybe implying some distant kinship?

Then there is the question of just *where* he received his Christian knowledge. Bede stresses how utterly uneducated he was, and unfamiliar with any religious or Biblical teaching, but let's explore that. Bede wants to tell a miracle tale, and that only works if he makes Caedmon a cultural and

educational blank slate. In reality, he might not have been. If Caedmon was British, and especially if there was some kind of aristocratic background, even a generation or so before, then his family would certainly have been Christian, and for centuries beforehand. Now, that Christian background need not necessarily have meant much in terms of his actual knowledge or skill. But I just offer the possibility that Caedmon was bringing some half-buried family traditions to bear in his verse. Bede explicitly says that English was his native tongue, but he makes no comment about whether Caedmon spoke any other language, such as British.

By the way, I talk about what Bede thought or believed. In fact, he was wholly guided by what he received from local sources and correspondents, in this case in Whitby, and we can't be sure how accurately or fully they were recording things.

However we answer these various questions, Caedmon does contribute to that long standing debate about how Britain became England. Here, for certain, we have an apparent British person of Celtic stock and name, who not only speaks Anglo-Saxon as his native tongue, but composes in it, leaving no trace of any Celtic antecedents.

Finally, I offer one other cross-cultural connection from roughly this same time period. In the 680s, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex had a tough warrior king named Caedwalla, who would have lived from roughly 659 to 689. His name is exactly the same as that of the (British/Welsh) Cadwallon I mentioned earlier, although Bede does not suggest that the Wessex prince was in any sense "non-English." This is only one of [several weirdly British names](#) that appear in the royal house of that otherwise impeccably Anglo-Saxon state. I honestly doubt that anyone deliberately chose to name an Anglo-Saxon princeling after a British king whose goal in life appears to have been exterminating the Anglo-Saxons. Rather, the name just stemmed from an old British/Welsh aristocratic family which was interbred with the ruling house of Wessex, and possibly the Gwynedd royal line that produced the original Cadwallon. As in Caedmon's humble case, the British bloodline was flowing in that house.

So yes, British and English, pagans and Christians, were far more intertwined than we might otherwise suspect. It would be oddly appropriate if this one man, who stands at the beginning of "English" culture, should himself had exemplified that process of interbreeding and cultural interaction. Or as Kipling almost wrote, "And so was Britain born."

Another English-born writer, Denise Levertov wrote [a fine poem about Caedmon](#) and the moment of his inspiration.

Why Did Nobody Come Back To Get It?

November 22, 2019 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[2 Comments](#)

So much of what we know about the past – including the early Christian past, and the era of the Bible – depends on archaeology. One recent story makes me think again about a crucial point in these matters, and one that is often surprisingly neglected. The point applies to the archaeology of many different eras and places.

The specific story I am reading concerns the [Staffordshire Hoard](#),a spectacular collection of seventh century Anglo-Saxon treasures found in an English field several years ago, and now the subject of a major book length study. [Do look at the pictures there](#): they are straight from a real life world of *Game of Thrones*. I'll come back to this collection later, and particularly to some fascinating Christian objects.

But my point about the whole hoard and its contents is this. How did they get there, and why do we have them today?

Some objects from the past are found where they were clearly intended to be placed, either in or on top of the ground. This would include buildings, monuments, or graves. A great many other things, though, are found buried or concealed in seemingly random places. That includes manuscripts or scrolls or lost gospels, but also hoards of treasure, precious objects, or coins. Archaeologists find these things, they celebrate them and publicize them, but we often don't think quite enough about why they are there in the first place. Think about it. When did you last take all your finest valuables and bury them in the back yard? I very much doubt if you ever did such a thing thinking "This will provide a wonderful basis for a Discovery Channel program in the 31ˢᵗ century!"

Actually, there is an exception to that statement, in that pagan societies often did bury things deliberately with the intention of making gifts to the gods, as so-called votive offerings. They buried them in the ground, or sank them in rivers, and the objects show up millennia later. But those actions usually stand out in the record.

By way of contrast, let's take a non-pagan example. One of the finest treasures of Roman Christian antiquity comes from [Water Newton, in eastern England](#). Found in 1975, it's a wonderful collection of silver objects with explicitly [Christian marks and symbols](#). Almost certainly, it represents the liturgical silver of a major church, probably a bishop's seat at the nearby town of Durobriviae – a cathedral, if you like. It's great evidence for the strength and prosperity of Christianity in late Roman Britain, say of the fourth century.

But again, two questions should arise. First, why is it there in the first place? Without argument, someone buried it to keep it safe in a time of presumed danger, whether a civil war or, more likely, barbarian raids. The devastating invasion and crisis of 367-368, the "Great Conspiracy," would be an obvious context. [But then think of the follow up](#). Once it was buried, why did nobody come back to dig it up? The obvious answer is that either the individuals who did the digging – or even the whole community – had been killed, or else removed far away from the site. Nobody thought, "Oh, we might as well leave it buried." In other words, the treasure is the monument to the obliteration of a community. It's testimony to oblivion and forgetting.

People bury things meaning to come back and get them. And then they don't. Why? I focus on those two questions. *Who buried it?* And at least as important, *why did nobody return to dig it up?* And that

second one has tragic or depressing implications. The buriers either died, or the records were lost, or the situation changed so totally that nobody felt safe about going back to retrieve it.

Think this through as a process. Here is an imaginative reconstruction. A church has five hundred members, and the barbarians are approaching. You decide to bury the treasure, and preferably in a secret place, far from the inquisitive eyes of wandering peasants. You dig at night. But who gets to know where it is? If fifty or a hundred people know, then the barbarians just have to grab someone at random and torture them till they talk. So, security demands that just three people know, say the bishop and two of his closest clerical allies. But if all three die in a raid, or are carried off into slavery, then the treasure … will end up being dug up a mere 1,600 years later, and will be the pride of the British Museum. Which is very small consolation to the people who did the concealing.

[Going back to the Staffordshire Hoard](). Why would someone bury all these wonderful things, all the splendid gold? And why did nobody come back for it? You can read the discussions at length, but here is a quick summary of at least part of the answer. In seventh century England, one of the deadliest and most effective kings was Penda, a vigorous pagan, who ruled the kingdom of Mercia. He appears as a villain in most Christian accounts, an enemy of conversion. He was the lethal foe of the kings who became Christian converts and even saints, like Oswald of Northumbria, whom he killed in battle. Penda won repeated victories, until finally, on November 15, 655 he was himself killed by Oswald's brother Oswiu. From the location alone, in the heart of his kingdom, it is very likely indeed that this was Penda's treasure. It represents a collection of things he had taken from defeated armies in his career, including their gorgeous gold objects, jewelry, and sword pommels.

That element of loot explains the Christian objects in the collection. That includes crosses, and also an engraved strip with Moses's words from Numbers 10.35 – in Latin, of course -"Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee." That would be very appropriate as a battle text, for a newly Christian king, and especially one going into battle against pagans. They don't mean that the person who buried it was Christian, but rather the king who collected these things was taking them from Christians. Quite likely, a Christian bishop blessed some sacred objects for a king going into battle against Penda, but Penda defeated him, and appropriated the treasure. Ditto for the so called gold "mystery object," which now appears to be "part of an early Christian head dress, worn by a priest or cleric." That lesson again: just because something is in a collection does not necessarily tell us about the views or beliefs of the owner of the collection. Perhaps he had just stolen it, as spoils of war.

Back to my two key questions. Who buried it? And why did nobody return to dig it up? We know that Penda marched off to war in 655, and he assuredly would have left some or all of his treasure back at his home base or palace. When news came of his defeat and death, did some trusty follower or relative bury the treasure to wait for more certainty? But they did not get the chance to retrieve it.

The best explanation is that the treasure was buried during the three years or so of total bloody chaos that followed Penda's death. (See *Game of Thrones* analogy above). Penda left two sons, one of whom, Peada, became king and accepted Christianity. However, [as an early source tells us](), "Peada ruled no length of time, because he was betrayed by his own queen at Eastertide [656]." He was "very wickedly killed" through his wife's treachery "during the very time of celebrating Easter." That wife, Ealhflæd, was the daughter of his deadly enemy Oswiu, who then tried to rule over the whole land as occupied territory. The Mercians revolted, and by 658, they established a second son of

Penda as the new king, Wulfhere. There are so many opportunities here for midnight burials of treasure, followed by people being assassinated before they could pass on the location to some trusted successor.

I imagine Wulfhere spending many fruitless years after 658 trying to work out exactly what had happened to the inheritance he should have got from his father. Did he order his followers out to dig hundreds of random holes in the ground, in what seemed like plausible hiding places? The fact they all failed is high credit to the people who actually did the hiding in the first place.

But to reiterate: no, they did not decide to leave it all in the ground for the sake of future museum curators.

Whenever you find "buried treasure," there is a story there, and it usually means no good whatever for the people who did the concealing. Somebody didn't come back, usually because they couldn't.

I'll return to this topic next time, in the context of other "treasures," namely scrolls and lost gospels.

Wall, Church, and Chalice

September 4, 2020 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have often posted at this site on British history during the post-Roman and Anglo-Saxon era, the time that we are absolutely not supposed to call the Dark Ages (but which they actually were). Partly, this is from my keen interest in the Christian era of that age, a time when a significant provincial church was snuffed out, and when congregations were forced to hide their liturgical treasures, which they sadly never lived to recover. I was very interested then to see a recent news headline, which actually has implications for early Christian history far beyond the British Isles.

One of the most amazing archaeological sites in Europe is Vindolanda, a Roman fortress on Hardrian's Wall in far northern England. Excavations have been in progress there for decades, and the finds have included some jaw-dropping examples of strictly contemporary Roman writing, including such everyday items as family dinner invitations. This is exactly the sort of thing that was not supposed to survive in a horribly wet climate like this. Egypt yes, Northumberland, no.

The Vindolanda Chalice

Vindolanda continues to amaze. The latest headline announces "Hadrian's Wall Dig Reveals Oldest Christian Graffiti On Chalice," and I quote the account in the British *Guardian*:

A 5th-century chalice covered in religious iconography has been discovered in Northumberland, to the astonishment of archaeologists, who describe it as Britain's first known example of Christian graffiti on an object. With its complex mass of crosses and chi-rhos, angels and a priestly figure, as well as fish, a whale and ships, it is believed to be without parallel in western Europe.

Do read that last phrase again.

As the excavator says,

"You've got crosses, a whale, fish, ships with lovely rigging and little flags, little angels, a priestly figure seemingly holding a crook with a big smiley face, ears of wheat."

You can see a rather better [illustration of the object in question here](#). Also [good illustrations here](#).

Northern Britain After Rome

Here is some context. Regular Roman forces left Britain in 410, but military installations remained occupied and defended by the successor kingdoms and statelets that followed them, and which fought off the surging attacks from various invaders – Picts, Scots, Anglo-Saxons. The story was complex ethnically, and the people defending the former "Roman" world themselves drew heavily on mercenaries from those invading hostiles. Over time, Roman organization and discipline broke down, and those military units became war-bands following chieftains or warlords, some of whom would be remembered in the historical record as kings. Some based themselves in old Roman forts, others reoccupied Iron Age hill-forts, but in each case, military needs took precedence.

Personal aside. At Cambridge back in the 1970s, I had the incredible privilege of attending the undergraduate lectures of archaeologist Brian Hope-Taylor. He was a phenomenally skilled excavator who had dug key Northumbrian royal and monastic sites, but was atrocious at publishing them. His book on the royal seat of [Yeavering](#) is a total classic, but there was so much more that never emerged in print, even about key royal sites. (Yeavering is about fifty miles from Vindolanda). I therefore have a solid sense of the archaeology of the region, and more to the point, my scribbled undergraduate notes contain lots of Hope-Taylor's passing comments, speculations, and insights, some of which are simply not available to specialists in that era. A couple of years ago, I donated those ancient notes of mine to the modern team investigating the fortress at Bamburgh.

The North in the sixth-seventh centuries was a warrior society, following "heroic" ideals, extolled by bards and poets. The kind of language and imagery they used is very well known today because one of the greatest scholars of the subject was J. R. R. Tolkien, who borrowed heavily to construct the language and thought-world of Middle-Earth. Some of the great northern British bards of this era were [Taliesin](#) and [Myrddin](#), whom later generations reimagined as Merlin.

For what it's worth, and I *wouldn't* push this, the Wall fort of Camboglanna is just eighteen miles west of Vindolanda, and that has occasionally been claimed as the site of King Arthur's last [battle of Camlann](#), which one famous chronicle dates to the 530s. I treat this issue with some care as I have colleagues I esteem who treat that claim more respectfully than I do.

What Happened to Christianity?

Fourth century Roman Britain was Christian, with the appropriate network of dioceses and churches. As the cities collapsed, so did traditional ecclesiastical structures. In some regions, especially the Western Celtic portions, monasteries became the primary seats of spiritual power, often connected to old shrines and martyrdom sites.

In this whole picture, Hadrian's Wall has always been something of a mystery. We know of kingdoms that existed in the area in the post-Roman centuries, of pagan Anglo-Saxon Bernicia to the east and Christian Celtic Rheged to the west (insofar as the ethnic labels mean much). But the Wall itself? What happened to Christianity there?

So now the Vindolanda dig has produced "a significant church of the 5th or 6th century," which would be astonishing anywhere in the islands, and the chalice adds immensely to the significance. I quote:

The foundations suggest that the church was large enough for about 60 parishioners. The structure somehow collapsed in on itself, but the chalice had been securely sealed under the rubble, perhaps in a ceremony marking the end of the church.

Here are some totally unanswerable questions. If you could miraculously interview one of the people attending the church around 540, what language(s) would they speak? Did different genders favor different languages – Germanic men married to Celtic British wives?

How would they identify themselves in terms of their ethnic identity or citizenship? What king or warlord or tribe did they acknowledge? Might they have been "Romans"? Or even the *gens Vindolandae*?

Or to pursue a pure fantasy that appeals to my inner historical novelist, did they claim to be the last members of a Roman legion that had actually ceased to exist 150 years earlier?

More substantially, did this particular church look to a territorial diocese? Based where?

Another great recent British find came from Tintagel in Cornwall, which is awash in legendary Arthurian links. A stone found here in 2018, and dating to the seventh century, included Greek letters as well as Latin characters, and the suggestion is that it was a teaching aid. It would be instructive to compare the new Vindolanda graffiti with the kind of scribbles produced there, not to mention the visual motifs in the VERY large corpus of inscribed early Christian memorial stones found in contemporary Wales and south-west England. Many date from these same fifth and sixth centuries.

Understanding the Lost Church

We are in the very early days of understanding the find, but I do make one point that seems to me critical, which is that this church was lost and forgotten. That is notable. Commonly, late Roman or early Celtic churches were remembered and survived in some form at least through the Middle Ages, maybe as parish churches or small monasteries, and some carried on to be taken over by later Anglo-Saxon states. Perhaps early Celtic founders were recalled as medieval saints, with the appropriate range of legends and miracles. But Vindolanda did not transition into the new Anglo-Saxon order, either as an inhabited settlement or a religious center. Why was that?

I'd love to have some sense of chronology here. Local coinage is non-existent in the fifth-sixth centuries, and the pottery is fiendishly hard to date, so how are the Vindolanda excavators offering that date? (The ordinary Northumbrian pottery of the era is horribly coarse). I am not challenging

their date, but just curious. Presumably this is based on the local stratigraphy? I see that other accounts say sixth century, but seriously, who can say between 450 and 550?

By the way, the fact there was a church at Vindolanda does not necessarily mean that there was a village or town in the ghostly setting of the old fort. Perhaps some clergy or monks just set up shop here to take advantage of the strong old walls, as they did in plenty of other old Roman forts around the British Isles. The early sixth century was a very active time for such new foundations across the western portions of the British Isles, making it the "Age of Saints."

So thoroughly was the Vindolanda church lost that the chalice was destroyed and broken up – perhaps an act of vandalism, perhaps a means of destroying it ritually so that it could not be reused improperly. There must have been other liturgical materials here, which presumably the last clergy removed – so why not the chalice? You can imagine a desperate pagan raid, or did Christianity just die out here? Or did a British-Celtic congregation flee from Anglo-Saxon Northumbrians, although at this stage these might also have been Christian themselves? Was it just too dangerous a border territory?

I just hope the excavators don't focus so much on the sensational chalice that they lose interest in the context of that church. The media are certainly doing just that.

Lots of questions to answer. But oh my, what a find.

I'll be following the subsequent [discussions and revelations](#) very attentively, and am collecting new accounts [as they appear](#). Watch this space.

Remembering Patrick

March 15, 2021 by [Philip Jenkins](#)
[0 Comments](#)

The St. Patrick's Day celebrations this year will be another casualty of the coronavirus pandemic. Normally, of course, many millions of people around the world commemorate St. Patrick as a symbol of Irish national pride, and that will continue, marches or no marches. I intend no slight whatever to that national consciousness. What is sad, though, is that portraying Patrick as a generic medieval saint with a powerful fondness for the color green prevents us seeing a real and genuinely heroic individual. He is moreover a person we can know much more thoroughly than the vast majority of his Christian contemporaries in Late Antiquity.

Virtually everything that his modern adherents know about Patrick is factually wrong, and that statement does not just apply to the expulsion of the snakes. He did not bring Christianity to Ireland. However we date Patrick's life – and exact chronology is notoriously difficult – his mission began after the arrival of one Palladius, who in 431 was "consecrated by Pope Celestine and sent to the Scots [Irish] believing in Christ, as their first bishop." First there were sporadic Christian

communities, then there was Palladius, then there was Patrick – and possibly a great many more of their kind. And far from achieving an overnight conversion, the process took at least a century or two.

Oh, and Patrick wasn't Irish: he was British. Deal with it.

Nor, through most of the Middle Ages, was Patrick regarded as any kind of national Irish symbol, rather than one great saint out of many. His shrine at Armagh was hugely venerated, but no more than other centers such as Clonmacnois, Glendalough, Kildare, and the island of Iona. The later glory of Patrick reflects the political triumphs of his medieval successors at Armagh.

What makes Patrick stand out from his contemporaries, though, is that we can know him through his own unquestioned words, rather than the embellishments of later hagiographers and hero-worshipers. Somewhere around 450, he heard of attacks being made on him by bishops in Britain and Gaul. They had heard of his missionary successes, but were dubious about the means he was using to win them.

Anyone familiar with contemporary missions will recognize the picture – deep suspicion for someone working outside the mainstream agencies and churches, going off on his own, rumors of dubious financial practices. Why was he making such lavish gifts? Was he *buying* converts?

In response, Patrick composed a [Confession](), which translates best as a Declaration. In the modern sense of the word, he confessed nothing, beyond admitting his sinful and ignorant state. Point by point, though, he answered his critics. He tells the famous story of how Irish raiders abducted him from his British home. He escaped, but returned as a missionary. He offers a wonderful account of what mission actually meant in those days, in a situation where the bishop could not count on any aid from the Roman Empire or the secular power, beyond the kings or chieftains whose favor he could win.

In a society like that, gifts were an absolute foundation of social life and interaction, and to refuse them was to cut yourself off from any hope of success. Certainly, he tried to be careful about the appearance of corruption. He tells us for instance of "the pious women who of their own accord made me gifts and laid on the altar some of their ornaments and I gave them back to them, and they were offended that I did so." It was a delicate balance.

The *Confession* is eminently worth reading, and I still discover new nuggets whenever I open it. One point that struck me this time was how much Patrick emphasizes the role of women in the conversion process. We hear for instance that

a blessed Irishwoman of noble birth, beautiful, full-grown, whom I had baptized, came to us after some days for a particular reason: she told us that she had received a message from a messenger of God, and he admonished her to be a virgin of Christ and draw near to God. Thanks be to God, on the sixth day after this she most laudably and eagerly chose what all virgins of Christ do. Not that their fathers agree with them: no—they often ever suffer persecution and undeserved reproaches from their parents; and yet their number is ever increasing. How many have been reborn there so as to be of our kind, I do not know—not to mention widows and those who practice continence

In passing, Patrick describes a poignant feature of the Irish religious scene. He writes,

But greatest is the suffering of those women who live in slavery. All the time they have to endure terror and threats. But the Lord gave His grace to many of His maidens; for, though they are forbidden to do so, they follow Him bravely.

These slave women were probably British captives seized in raids like the one that had originally claimed Patrick, and like him, trying heroically to keep their faith in their miserable new situation.

Patrick's greatest defense, though, was the results he had achieved, the "many thousands" he baptized. In pagan Ireland,

those who never had a knowledge of God, but until now always worshiped idols and things impure, have now been made a people of the Lord, and are called sons of God, that the sons and daughters of the kings of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ?

How could this not be God's work?

Patrick also wrote another and actually much greater document, the *Letter to Coroticus*, one of the boldest challenges to tyranny and military violence ever penned by a Christian leader, which I discussed some years ago in a column over at [RealClearReligion](). But from one document or both, I hope I make my point, that we are dealing here with a truly great Christian leader.

Can I just very briefly here cite a claim that surfaced a couple of years ago that [Patrick was himself a slave trader]()? I don't want to dismantle this piece by piece, but one core argument of that claim was that Patrick's whole tale of enslavement and escape from slavery was wildly unlikely and was therefore fiction. Basing my opinion not on simple piety but on my research and writing on the era, I see nothing whatever marginally improbable about the story as Patrick described it, nor was it, in any way, too good to be true. I echo the wise words of [Diarmaid MacCulloch]() on this debate, that "If you don't believe that, then you might as well not believe anything in Patrick's texts. You will enter a world of total relativity; it's a hermeneutic of suspicion gone mad." To say the least, I found the whole "slave trader" claim thoroughly unconvincing.

How a Climate Disaster Reshaped the World's Great Religions

June 18, 2021 by [Philip Jenkins]()
[0 Comments]()

Throughout history, [climate-driven disasters]() have a driven sudden and revolutionary change in human societies, transforming political, economic and religious orders, and laying a foundation for new structures. Often, these revolutionary epochs have had far reaching religious consequences. I write about this phenomenon at length in my current book, *[Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval]()*, but here let me offer one of the most intriguing and understudied examples I found in that research. Briefly, did such a climate catastrophe make possible the rise and victory of Islam in the seventh century? How did it affect the growth of Christianity in the British Isles?

Volcanoes and Doomsday

Some – by no means all – of the most dramatic such upheavals are closely associated with gigantic volcanic eruptions, occurring perhaps on the Pacific Rim, along the "Ring of Fire." Such events literally cast a shadow around the whole world. The resulting black clouds drop temperatures, and can ruin food production for a period of perhaps three or four years. One of the best-known examples is what occurred with the Indonesian volcano of Tambora, which erupted in 1815, and which generated famine and political crises across Europe over the following four years. Rains were astonishing, and 1816 was "the year without a Summer." Very often, such events are followed by grave outbreaks of plague or pestilence.In South Asia, the rapidly changing environmental conditions following Tambora, and the disrupted monsoons, allowed a previously harmless bacterium to evolve into a lethal new strain. Over the next decade, the world suffered its first cholera pandemic, a curse that blighted the coming century.

Such devastating terrestrial events leave traces in various forms, in ice cores or tree rings, when such a sequence of dark and cold years indicates that a cataclysm has occurred. Often, it is easy to correlate the key dates with historical records and find that, yes indeed, that particular era was richly productive of social collapse, political revolutions, and apocalyptic religious movements. How could it not have been? In looking at the effects of such a hammer blow, everything depends on just how strong states and economies were, and how able to withstand disaster. Even the powerful states of early nineteenth century Europe struggled to deal with the effects of Tambora, and in earlier times, more rudimentary state mechanisms must have crumbled or vanished altogether.

Over the past two millennia, the physical records point to many small phenomena, but to just a few really gargantuan examples, when conditions across much of the globe must briefly have become really hellish. These were absolutely not good times to be alive.

One of the most appalling examples involved a catastrophe in 626-627 AD, when a global occurrence – presumably an epically large volcanic eruption – left its unmistakable scar in tree ring records as far afield as North America. In the words of one scientist tracking those rings, "A few events are so severe that they show up in every tree … 2036 B.C., 43 B.C., 627 A.D." If not exactly a once in a millennium event, this one was a lulu (that's a technical geophysical term, honest). From another source, I quote:

A dry fog was reported from Ireland and the eastern Mediterranean, for 9 months starting in the October of about 626. Ash fell in A.D. 626 at Constantinople. … The impact on European weather appears to have been limited, but Asia was badly affected. Chinese records talk about frost disasters and famine from 626 to 629. One record from 628 mentions: "There has been a frost in midsummer. The sun had risen from same place for five days. The moon had had the same light level for three days. The field was filled with red atmosphere (dust storm)."

That event sparked renewed crises across Eurasia over the next five years. The sudden cooling and darkening wiped out livestock herds, precipitating the collapse of the Eastern Turkic Empire, then the most powerful state in northeast Asia. The southward migration of other Turkic peoples led to overwhelming assaults on the already stumbling Persian Empire, where Mesopotamia now suffered a plague that reportedly killed half its population.

Put simply, 626 was an empire slayer.

Romans and Persians

These developments had vast and enduring political consequences. For twenty years, the East Roman Empire had been locked in a death struggle against the Persians, when for a while it seemed likely that the Persians would eliminate and absorb the Roman world. The Roman Emperor Heraclius had made an enormous comeback in the previous few years, but the crisis of 627-8 made possible an overwhelming victory. Assisted by those Turkish hordes sweeping in from the north, Heraclius won a decisive victory at Nineveh in 627. In 628, the Persian king was assassinated and the regime came close to collapse, giving the Romans an absolute victory.

Accounts of those wars often make reference to weather conditions, but rarely pay specific attention to the volcanic effects. What gave Heraclius victory, for instance, was his ability to push forward in a dire winter that deterred his enemies. Also, we must remember what the armies of the two superpowers looked like in this era. Both Rome and Persia relied heavily on large and sophisticated military machinery, which included battlefield artillery designed to overwhelm enemies with missiles, stones or arrows, as well as siege engines. Both sides were heirs to a millennium of brilliant military engineering and mathematics dating back to Archimedes and beyond. But however lethal such weapons were in themselves, their users had to be able to see to shoot.

The critical Battle of Nineveh had the result it did because what was described as a heavy "fog" prevented the Persians from using their terrifying missile-throwing artillery. Given the climate conditions of that precise year, of 627 AD,, that sounds exactly like the post-Tambora volcanic clouds that people wrote about a millennium later, which turned day to night. Other accounts mention drenching rains that left the Persian bowstrings sodden and barely usable: again, shades of Tambora. The "fog of war" – and the accompanying rains – ensured Roman victory.

Muhammad and Islam

In neighboring Arabia, this was just the time when the Prophet Muhammad was struggling against the wealthy trading elites, preaching a message of divine Judgment that suddenly sounded all the more relevant. Weren't the skies literally turning dark, as famine and plague swept the land? Although the sequence of events is uncertain, the calamity undermined those traditional leaders, wrecking their food supplies and trade networks, and opened the way to the revolutionary new Islamic order. Muhammad's forces initially suffered repeated setbacks but he now recovered to consolidate his hold on Medina, where in 627 he won the decisive Battle of the Trench, *Al-Khandaq*. The following year, the Muslims signed the crucial Treaty of Hudaybiyyah with the Meccan Qurayshi tribe, giving the new movement an unprecedented degree of recognition and respectability. Muhammad finally took Mecca in 630, and Muslim forces had conquered most of Arabia by 632.

As those forces expanded out of Arabia, they easily conquered the older states and empires that were now fatally weakened, including Rome and Persia. Besides the interminable wars, plague had shattered the older societies. The conquest of Persia resulted in the utter destruction of the Zoroastrian religious hierarchy and its institutional structures, and gradually, the near-total elimination of that faith. Zoroastrianism faded from being a major world religion to a marginal and often despised creed. It was Islam that triumphed across much of Southern and Western Asia.

The succession of climate catastrophes smashed long-established transcontinental empires and religious structures, and opened the door to altogether new entities. Did climate factors "cause" the rise of Islam? Of course not. But they accelerated the political and military victory of that new faith.

Christians in Northumbria

I also note one other critical religious development at this very time, in the British Isles. This requires some background. The scholarly source I mentioned earlier remarks that Europe was not that badly affected by the 626-627 episode. Well, maybe. But the 620s are an abominably badly recorded era in West European history, at least by contemporary sources, and it might well be that the lack of comments about dreadful weather might just reflect the near-total scarcity of literate observers. To take an obvious example, the best and most copious source on Frankish history was Gregory of Tours, who had died a generation earlier. But if you look at reliable scholars writing not too long after the event, they recall a rather different story.

In the 620s, the most significant kingdom in Britain was the Anglo-Saxon realm of Northumbria, under its king, Edwin. In that pivotal year of 627, he accepted Christianity and was baptized, in an epochal moment in British (and West European) religious history. A century later, the historian Bede recalled the debates among Edwin's royal council over the new faith. Bede was in an excellent position to know these transactions in some detail, because of the range of sources to which he had access – family traditions, but also what we might call oral history from participants, or their children.

At the crucial meeting that preceded Edwin's decision, one noble decided the debate [when he remarked that](#)

The present life of man upon earth, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the house wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your ealdormen and thegns, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow [turbinibus hiemalium pluuiarum uel niuium] *are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest* [hiemis tempestate]; *but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all. If, therefore, this new doctrine tells us something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.*

It's one of the most famous passages in English historical writing. And the power of the rhetoric does gain immensely when we realize that the skies in that winter of 626-27 were terrifyingly dark, and that wintry storms of rain or snow really were raging abroad. This was not just a generic "It was a dark and stormy night." These were conditions of a kind that would have been beyond human memory.

As in Arabia, Doomsday religion suddenly became very plausible indeed.

Besides my recent book, a couple of important sources include [Alex Ross, "The Past and the Future of the Earth's Oldest Trees,"](#) *New Yorker*, January 13, 2020; and Jie Fei, Jie Zhou and Yongjian Hou, "Circa A.D. 626 Volcanic Eruption, Climatic Cooling, and the Collapse of the Eastern Turkic Empire," *Climatic Change* 81 (2007): 469–475.