# The Prevalence of Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 410

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Popular mythology claims that Joseph of Arimathea introduced Christianity into Britain in AD 63 when he brought the Holy Grail to Glastonbury after Christ's crucifixion. As this story demonstrates, a befuddling mix of myth, tradition and fact dominates the period preceding the Roman withdrawal. The literary evidence comes primarily from later sources like Bede and Gildas, who depend on older sources that have since been lost. In these texts it is often difficult to differentiate fact from fiction, as well as to establish with any certainty the depth to which Christianity had infiltrated the island. When the Romans withdrew from Britain in the early fifth century, they not only left behind a vast Roman culture, but also a religion, Christianity, which was inherently Roman. In the last centuries of the Roman Empire, Christianity was a major factor in defining oneself as being Roman, or possessing *Romanitas*. This held true even in areas as remote as Britain, but very little has been done to explore the correlation between Christianity and 'Romanness.' Twenty years ago, scholarship was remarkably lacking in explaining the extent of Romano-British Christianity. Given the dearth of literary and historical sources from this time period, students of Romano-British Christianity must inevitably turn to archaeology. In 1930, archaeologist and historian Collingwood emphasized the fact that there was very little evidence for Christianity.[1] However, since Jocelyn Toynbee's study of Christian art in Britain in 1953, archaeologists have discovered hundreds of new sites and artifacts. Dorothy Watts in particular has re-evaluated many previously ignored sites as well as introduced new indicators of Christianity. As a result, new research has proven that Christianity was not solely an urban, upper-class phenomenon. Instead, it had widespread appeal throughout Britain and elicited a deep commitment from its adherents, which allowed Christianity to persist even through the pagan attacks of the fifth century AD and beyond. New archaeological

1 D. Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London, 1991), 11.

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evidence supports the primary sources that argue that Christianity penetrated a great further into the British land and society than previously thought.

There is a lack of literary sources from Late Roman Britain. Gildas, who wrote in the sixth century AD, laments in his *De Excidio Britanniae* that he cannot use very many literary remains from Britain because "such as they were, are not now available, having been burnt by enemies or removed by our countrymen when they went into exile."[2] However, there is some evidence of Christianity in Britain by the late second century. Tertullian, a North African scholar, claims in his *Adversus Judaeos* that by AD 200 Christianity was already established in the more remote territories of the Roman Empire. He then lists those areas and makes mention of "*Britannorum inaccesa Romanis loca*" which were said to be "*Christo vero subdita*."[3] While this passage is rather vague, it nevertheless demonstrates that Christian writers were aware of Britain and its Christian inhabitants. Origen, a contemporary of Tertullian, also makes mention of "*the terra Britanniae*" as a region on the borders of the civilized world. This helped to demonstrate the triumph of the Church "*quae mundi limites tenent*."[4] Similar to Tertullian, Origen remarks that even the "end of the world" had a population of Christians worth mentioning. A question that arises from both of these accounts is how Tertullian and Origen received knowledge of Christianity in a place as remote as Britain. Most likely they received accounts through traders who sailed between Britain and the main trading centers of the Roman Empire.

Britain did not receive nearly as many missionaries as other remote parts of the Empire. Instead, the transmission of Christianity came in the form of trade routes from the Mediterranean. Trade allowed for British pilgrims to travel to the Continent, where they could experience Continental Christianity and then return and put their new-found beliefs into practice. Or, it could be the other way around, in that there was an increased demand by British Christians for passages to holy sites on the Continent.[5] Tertullian and Origen were from Carthage and Alexandria respectively, both large trading centers of the Empire. First- and second- century Greek coins from Carthage as well as Gallic swords have been discovered in Britain. Margaret Deanesly concludes that "there is thus no lack of evidence of sea trade between western Britain, Gaul, and the Mediterranean, and the possibility that here also Christianity came with the traders cannot be ruled out."[6] It stands to reason then

[2] Gildas, *De. Ex*. 17 (the page numbers of the relevant edition, rather than section numbers, are used here for ancient sources).

[3] Tertullian, *Adv. Iudaeos* 7, discussed by K. Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation*. Vol. 1, *From Roman Times to 1066* (London, 1999): 37.

[4] Origen, *Homily 4 on Ezekiel*, discussed by Hylson-Smith, 37.

that traders would have brought stories from Britain and in addition introduced traditions into Britain.

Gildas is an important source, for his writings are the earliest extant on Roman Britain. Gildas wrote in the sixth century AD, with a deep interest in the state of Christianity in Britain. He explains that before Diocletian's reign (he supposes) "Christ's precepts were received by the inhabitants without enthusiasm; but they remained, more or less pure." During the persecution under Diocletian, "churches were razed throughout the world, the holy scriptures… were burned in the squares, and the chosen priests of the Lord's flock, together with their harmless sheep, were slaughtered - so that there should… be no trace of the Christian religion remaining."[7]

Gildas makes the first mention of three British martyrs, St. Alban of Verulam, Aaron and Julius of Caerleon (also known as Caerwent), as well as many others. Gildas's narrative suggests that their martyrdoms took place in the early fourth century. Christianity became much more popular after the Peace of the Church, or the Edict of Milan, in AD 313. Before this time, however, there is evidence of a limited Christian population. It is safe to assume that the martyrdoms of three early British men Alban, Aaron, and Julius are based on historical fact, given that the writings of Bede, Gildas, Constantius, and Venantius Fortunatus all mention them. While there is still much debate over the exact dates of the martyrdoms, their martyrdoms most likely took place under the persecutions of Emperor Decius in the third century, or as Gildas claims, in the beginning of the fourth century.

This also means that there was most likely a strong Christian base by the fourth century in Britain to produce so many martyrs. Bede also makes mention of the persecution under Diocletian: "Diocletian in the east and Maximianus Herculius in the west ordered the churches to be laid waste and the Christians persecuted and slain… it continued without ceasing for ten years accompanied by the burning of churches, the outlawry of innocent people, and the slaughter of the martyrs. In fact Britain also attained the great glory of bearing faithful witness of God."[8]

Bede is another critical primary source in studying the state of Christianity in Britain. If not for his work, knowledge of British Christianity would be virtually lost until St.

[5] C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), 348.

[6] M. Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England* (London, 1963), 5, discussed by Hylson-Smith, 38.

[7] Gildas, *De. Ex*. 19.

Augustine's mission in the sixth century. Bede writes his narrative in the eighth century and seeks to demonstrate the chronology of Christianity in Britain. In one particularly interesting passage Bede writes that in AD 156[9] "Lucius, a king of Britain, sent him [Bishop of Rome Eleutherius] a letter praying him that he might be made a Christian."[10] The *Historia Brittonum* from a century later also mentions this event. Reverend Gunn, the translator of the *Historia Brittonum*, provides an interesting note on the text regarding the history of Lucius's family. He explains that Lucius's grandfather Caractacus was exiled from Britain and they lived in Rome for an extended period of time: "At Rome, these unfortunate exiles could not but admire the virtues of the Christians who abounded in that city."[11] As a result of their experiences in Rome, when the family returned to Britain they sought to convert to Christianity, which was carried out under Lucius.

Several other sources also mention the conversion of King Lucius. The *Liber Pontificalis* (a possible source for Bede) and successors to Bede's text, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Historia Brittonum*, all write about this event. Nennius writes that "after the Birth of Christ, one hundred and sixty-seven years, King Lucius, with all the chiefs of the British people received Baptism, in consequence of a legation sent by the Roman emperors and Pope Euaristus."[12] This is slightly different from Bede's account, which states that King Lucius specifically requested the baptism. Other sources, like the one Nennius is using here, claims that it was in fact Pope Eleutherius that spurred the conversion. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* echoes Bede: "Eleutherius succeeded to the bishopric of Rome…To him Lucius, king of Britain, sent letters - asked that he might be made a Christian, and he carried out what he asked, and afterwards they remained in the true faith until the rule of Diocletian."[13] This shows that there were multiple accounts concerning the early history of the Church in Britain that have since been lost. It also demonstrates that there was a tradition of Christianity long before Constantine's conversion.

The authors themselves are another important detail surrounding the issue of Christianity in Roman Britain. Written sources provide valuable evidence about both politics and religion in later Roman Britain and they are all by, and about, Christians. "It certainly suggests that the educated and literate were more and more likely to adopt what was now the official faith of the Roman world. Opposition is manifested through heresy, not

[8] Bede, *HE* 28.

[9] The correct date of this event is actually AD 161.

[10] Bede, *HE* 25 states: 'Misit ad eum Lucius Brittaniarum rex epistolam, obsecrans ut…Christianus efficeretur.'

[11] *HB* 135, n. 48.

[12] Ibid., 57.

paganism."[14] Henig proposes that there may have been a shift towards Christianity at the end of the fourth century.[15] After Constantine, an overwhelming majority of Roman emperors were Christian. Once Christianity had the support of the Roman state behind it, it could play a much more important role in the far-reaching areas of the empire. Most importantly, Christianity became associated with *Romanitas*. For example, Sidonius Apollinaris was a "defender at one and the same time of his diocese and of *Romanitas*."[16] Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, aristocrats wishing to maintain their Roman prestige began to shift their attentions to Christian matters. It is no surprise then that in the fourth century Britain had representation in many church meetings. In AD 314, three British bishops attended the Council at Arles: Restitutus the Bishop of London, Eborius of York, and Adelfius of Lincoln. Later in AD 359, there were bishops at a council in Rimini.[17] This demonstrates that Britain possessed a committed, organized church that spread from the South East all the way up to Lincoln in the North East.

Further literary references to Romano-British Christianity are virtually non-existent for the period up to the withdrawal of the Roman forces. Therefore, in order to determine the extent of Christianity in the period from the conversion of Constantine to c. 410, literary evidence must yield to archaeological evidence.[18] When Jocelyn Toynbee completed her initial work in 1953 on Christian archaeological findings in Britain, she found 50 items that could be viewed as Christian artifacts. Twenty years later, C.F Mawer provided another catalogue of British Christian items, which raised the total to 260 items of Christian significance. However, Mawer concluded from her findings that "Christianity in Britain was not only far less prevalent but also neither as complex nor as subtle as the claimed evidence indicated."[19] She narrowed her finds so that only 70 of these objects could be of "definite Christian significance."

Miranda Green also claimed that Christianity was not very widespread in Roman Britain. She labeled archaeological sites that were located primarily in towns, and she did not have any evidence for rural Christianity. Green depended almost entirely on archaeological references, with only a few literary references to Bede. "The distribution of Christian objects in Britain during the late Roman period shows a thin scatter throughout

[13] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 8.
[14] M. Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (London, 1984), 216.
[15] Henig, 216.
[16] Ibid., 226.
[17] Hylson-Smith, 54.
[18] Watts, 11.

southern and eastern Britain."[20] Most archaeological evidence, according to Green, "is associated with the owners of Roman villas." Thus Green concludes that Christianity was popular mainly among the aristocracy of urban Britain, not among the lower rural classes.[21]

Archaeological evidence regarding Romano-British Christianity has grown substantially since the writings of Mawer and Green. When Thomas wrote in 1981, he wrote about several possible archaeological sites that could possibly be Christian. Since his research, scholars like Dorothy Watts have since revisited the previous evidence and re-interpreted it. As a result, there are now much greater numbers of sites that can be more confidently posed as Christian.[22]

One of the new approaches to gauge Christianity in Britain is the analysis of cemeteries. Prior to Dorothy Watts's and Charles Thomas's research, "tangible evidence [was] lacking in Britain, at least so far as burials are concerned, and up to now there have been no certain Christian cemeteries identified from the Roman era."[23] Indeed, Watts's data has proven that Christianity was much more prevalent in rural areas than Green thought: "Of the thirteen cemeteries presumed to be Christian, seven are from rural sites."[24] Critical criteria for a Christian cemetery included west-east orientation of the burial places, undisturbed graves, an absence of decapitated bodies, contemporaneous pagan burials, and absence of grave goods, especially the coin for Charon's fee.[25] Another important criterion that has not received proper attention is the presence of infant burials. Prior to Christianity, pagan religions periodically engaged in infant purging and rarely gave small children proper burials. When Christianity became popular, these practices changed. In his Apologeticus, Tertullian condemns those who commit infanticide by abortion or exposure.[26] Children were a very special group to Jesus, and there are many references in the New Testament instructing Christians to be child-like. In addition, by the early fourth century, baptism was available to infants, which made them members of the Christian community, and therefore worthy of a proper Christian burial in a cemetery with other Christians. Thus the presence of small children in cemeteries may denote an almost certain tie with Christianity. Another new discovery was the association of cemeteries with

[19] C.F. Mawer, *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1995), 142; discussed by Hylson-Smith, xxi.

[20] M. Green, *The Religions of Civilian Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1976), 61.

[21] Ibid., 63.

[22] Watts, 215. I am indebted to Watts' research regarding the criteria of identifying Christian cemeteries and churches, as well as her re-interpretations of previous research, most notably that of Charles Thomas.

[23] Ibid., 38.

Christian churches.

Church sites are also critical for establishing Christian presence in Britain. Literary evidence attests the presence of churches at Silchester, Caerwent (also known as Caerleon, who had two notable martyrs in Aaron and Julius), and (from Bede) Canterbury. Charles Thomas researched sites that had a similar shape to churches on the Continent. But Dorothy Watts argues that most communities were not rich enough to build such elaborate buildings. Instead, she poses that many square-shaped buildings (especially in rural areas) could have served as religious buildings. The rudimentary forms of these churches may reflect a lack of Roman sophistication, as well as the slowness in which *Romanitas* penetrated those areas.[27] Thus, it is much more difficult to identify buildings as churches that lack a "typical" construction or Christian iconography. Watts proposes that "the presence of non-domestic, non-industrial, or non-agricultural buildings in association with cemeteries of the fourth century and beyond is an indicator of the Christian identity for both the building and the cemetery."[28] Given the fact that cemeteries have not received wide attention from scholarship, their examination has produced many more possible Christian sites, many of which are located in rural areas. Watts concludes from her research that "of the seventeen [churches] analyzed, eight were urban and nine rural."[29] This is a vastly different conclusion from Miranda Green's research, who found that Christianity was present only in towns. The fact that there are so many more rural sites reaffirms the belief that Christianity was in fact much more widespread in Britain, and that it appealed to all classes, not just the elite.

In addition to the poverty of the buildings, many were originally Romano-Celtic temples that were converted to serve as Christian centers: "temples often replaced earlier Celtic structures or marked a sacred place."[30] These sites may have served a symbolic function in that they showed the new religion (i.e. Christianity) triumphing over the new. As a result, there is not a "typical" construction for churches, and indeed many would resemble pagan temples without closer inspection. Some churches were not even their own buildings, but were extensions of aristocratic villas, which is the case in the Lullingstone site.

[24] Watts, 220.
[25] Ibid., 88.
[26] Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 9.4, discussed by Watts, 49.
[27] Watts, 141.
[28] Ibid., 115.

Villas and house churches contributed greatly to the spread and upkeep of Christianity in rural areas. Christian landowners could potentially encourage their tenants to adhere to Christianity by having a convenient church for the local community. A prime example of such a church is the Lullingstone site. Although the villa was eventually abandoned, its house church was still used by the surrounding population for years afterward.[31] Many of these constructions display murals and paintings with both pagan and Christian iconography. These depictions often show characters like Orpheus; in the early history of the church, Orpheus became a representation of Christ. Like Orpheus, Christ tamed wild animals and descended into the Underworld to free trapped souls. As a result, these depictions of Orpheus can be an indication of Christianity as well as the continuity between the Classical Roman religion and the new. Villas and country estates were critical in promoting and tending to the spread of Christianity in areas far from the influence of Romanized towns.

Another valuable method of determining the popularity of Christianity is to evaluate how many pagan shrines were in use compared to pre-Christian times. "Many of the Romano-Celtic temples were extremely active during the fourth century even though the Roman world was officially Christian… Some of the pagan town temples did have a shorter life than some of the country examples… of the town shrines only a few show evidence of use after 350."[32] This evidence suggests that as Christianity became more prominent in Britain, pagan practices dwindled. This would coincide with the fact that many aristocrats as well as merchants dwelled in the cities, the classes most concerned with Romanitas. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, these same people had a vested interest in adopting the new religion to retain their Romanitas.

By the time of the Roman withdrawal, Christianity had penetrated not only into British towns, but into rural areas as well. When scholars first reviewed literary evidence regarding the period prior to the Roman withdrawal, they concluded that the sources were embellishing the prevalence of Christianity to fit their narratives. However, advances in archaeology have proven and continue to prove that Christianity was much more prevalent in Britain than previously expected, thus strengthening the claims of writers like Bede and Gildas.

Country villas played a vital role in spreading Christianity into these parts. Romano-

[29] Watts, 220.
[30] Ibid., 107.
[31] Ibid., 100.

British aristocrats who wished to uphold the idea of *Romanitas* adopted the customs of Christianity and built churches adjacent to their holdings. These buildings continued to be used by the general population even after the owners of the villas had departed. Archaeological evidence has played a vital role in re-assessing the prevalence of Christianity in Britain. Scholars such as Frend and Green, who originally saw Christians as a very small minority, have had to amend their views in light of new developments. Even Charles Thomas's work from 1983 has since been updated by Dorothy Watts. Watts re-evaluated sites that previous archaeologists wrote off as mere buildings, for they did not believe that there was a lower class component to Romano-British Christianity, which is not the case. Buildings that seemingly held no purpose have now been identified as poor churches. Thomas had limited his identification of churches to those buildings with clear apses or separate rooms for worship. However, these kinds of structures would not have been affordable to a poor rural community. Christianity was therefore much more alive in the British landscape than was previously thought.

Christianity was widespread in Late Roman Britain and it possessed roots in Britain strong enough to persist through the Anglo-Saxon invasions in the mid-fifth century and beyond. Although previous scholarship has painted Christianity as a minority religion in Britain, residing only in the towns and among the upper classes, new evidence has expanded this view. It is true that Christianity played an important role in maintaining Roman tradition in cities, which prevented Christianity from disappearing. The importance of urban Christianity is great, but it is also important to realize that Christianity was not limited to the more Romanized centers of Britain; it had more widespread appeal, even among the lower classes. Indeed, the rusticity of most of the church sites implies that lower-class Christians were even more common than rich, urban Christians. Scholarship has advanced a great deal in the last few decades, and with the amount of new evidence that scholars have found in such a short span of time, it stands to reason that there is still much more to be found and even more to be re-evaluated. As more evidence is unearthed, Christianity will prove to have been more prevalent than contemporary writers have believed.

[32] Green, 63.

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