British and English Churches in Late-Seventh-Century Wessex: Who was Peripheral?

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Late-seventh-century texts from south-western Britain, especially a letter addressed by Abbot Aldhelm of Malmesbury to a British king and his clergy, offer a different perspective on relations between the British and English churches to that provided by eighth-century Northumbrian authors. The writings of Bede and Stephen of Ripon have cast a long shadow by suggesting that hostility between British and English Christians was the norm. The 660s have been interpreted as a turning-point, with the arrival of Theodore of Tarsus as archbishop of Canterbury leading to the Britons being branded as heretics and impeding any interaction between British and English churches. This article argues that, in the South-West, relations remained warm until the final years of the seventh century, notwithstanding differences over the date of Easter and the tonsure. Dumnonia's political decline was principally responsible for British Christianity's ultimate marginalization.

Introduction

In south-western Britain, British and West Saxon Christians enjoyed warm relations into the late seventh century. The writings of Aldhelm of Malmesbury (*c.*642–709), a leading West Saxon churchman, display his regard for British Christianity and attest to extensive contacts, including hospitality and joint worship. Texts from Wessex contrast with sources, notably works by influential early-eighth-century Northumbrian authors, which have created an impression of profound hostility between the British and English churches, particularly from the 660s.

Foremost among these, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* presented the Britons negatively, as a 'nation of heretics' (*gentis perfidae*) opposed to

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both the Catholic Church and the English. He alleged that they refused to evangelize the Angles and Saxons, and highlighted Britons' ongoing rejection of Roman practice in respect of the date of Easter and the tonsure.[1] The reasons for Bede's animus against the Britons have been vigorously debated, the interpretation most favourable to him suggesting that he simply adopted Gildas's line in the late-fifth- or early- to mid-sixth-century *De Excidio Britanniae*.[2] Alternatively, literary imperatives may have required that the Britons provide a 'foil' for the virtues of the English and Irish.[3] The suspicion that the *Historia* reflects Bede's own ethnic antipathy has been especially influential.[4] This antipathy appears to be connected to his perception of a contemporary British threat, plausibly emanating from the kingdom of Strathclyde.[5] Bede's commentary on the First Book of Samuel may also reflect Northumbrian divisions, with some of its elite collaborating with Britons.[6]

Alexander Murray's argument that Bede saw the Britons as an 'unchosen' people depends on Bede's casting the English as God's chosen people, a new Israel.[7] Gildas had referred to the Britons as 'latter-day Israel' (*praesens Israel*), apparently considering them a new chosen people.[8] However, the notion that Bede saw the English as the new chosen people has been criticized, since his and other early medieval

[1] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* [hereafter: *HE*] 2.2, 5.23; ET: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and transl. Bertram Colgrave and Roger Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 140–3, 560–1.
[2] T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Bede, the Irish and the Britons', *Celtica* 15 (1983), 42–52.
[3] Clare Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, Whithorn Lecture 2005 (Whithorn, 2007), 11–12.
[4] Alan Thacker, 'Bede, the Britons and the Book of Samuel', in Stephen Baxter, ed., *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, 2009), 129–47, at 134; W. Trent Foley and Nicholas J. Higham, 'Bede on the Britons', *Early Medieval Europe* 17 (2009), 154–85, at 157–9; Stancliffe, Bede and the Britons, 12; Nicholas Brooks, 'From British to English Christianity: Deconstructing Bede's Interpretation of the Conversion', in Catherine E. Karkov and Nicholas Howe, eds, *Conversion and Colonization in Anglo-Saxon England* (Tempe, AZ, 2006), 1–30, at 7.
[5] Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 23–30.
[6] Thacker, 'Bede, the Britons', 142–4.
[7] Alexander Murray, 'Bede and the Unchosen Race', in Huw Pryce and John Watts, eds, *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007), 52–67, at 59.
[8] Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae* [hereafter: *DEB*] 26, in *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and transl. Michael Winterbottom, rev. edn (London, 2002), 13–79, 87–142, at 28, 98; George Molyneaux, 'Did the English Really Think they were God's Elect in the Anglo-Saxon Period?', *JEH* 64/4 (2014), 721–37.

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writers' fundamental concern was with the universal Church.[9] Nonetheless, the *Historia*'s English-British dichotomy perpetuates the question of how Bede perceived each people's providential status, particularly given his assertion that 'God in his goodness did not reject the people whom he foreknew'.[10] Unusually, W. Trent Foley and Nicholas Higham interpreted this as referring not to the English but to the Britons, suggesting Bede saw them as analogous to the Jews, with the English analogous to the Church.[11] For Samuel Cardwell, however, Bede took the Britons as a 'cautionary tale' for the English, viewing the former as a chosen people violating their covenant.[12]

Stephen of Ripon, Bede's contemporary and Wilfrid's hagiographer, likewise assumed that hostility characterized English-British relations. His *Vita Wilfridi* offered two vignettes showing Northumbrian destruction of the British church. In the first, Wilfrid, standing in his church at Ripon, recited 'a list of the consecrated places in various parts which the British clergy had deserted when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation.'[13] He related, moreover, how Wilfrid, having restored a British woman's child to life, seized him by force, renamed him 'Eodwald Bishop's Son' and committed him to the minster-community at Ripon.[14] Eodwald's baptism at English hands made him a true Christian, unlike his mother, whom Stephen likened to the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark's Gospel: a 'dog', outside Israel and the normal scope of divine grace.[15]

Such hostility was not confined to eighth-century Northumbrian texts. Penitential texts associated with Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury (r. 669–90), survive in seven recensions, some dating from

[9] Molyneaux, 'Did the English?', 726–9; Conor O'Brien, 'Chosen Peoples and New Israels in the Early Medieval West', *Speculum* 95 (2020), 987–1009.
[10] '[N]on tamen divina pietas plebem suam, quam praescivit, deseruit': *HE* 1.22 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 69).
[11] Foley and Higham, 'Bede on the Britons', 165–70, 184–5. Compare Charles-Edwards, 'Bede, the Irish', 52; Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 5; Molyneaux, 'Did the English?', 729.
[12] Samuel Cardwell, 'The People Whom He Foreknew', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 11 (2015), 41–66, at 42, 58–9.
[13] '[E]a loca sancta in diversis regionibus quae clerus Bryttannus, aciem gladii hostilis manu gentis nostrae fugiens, deseruit': Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi* [hereafter: *VW*] 17, ed. and transl. Bertram Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927), 37.
[14] *VW* 18 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 41).
[15] Ibid.; Mark 7: 24–30.

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Theodore's lifetime.[16] These texts include some stringent rulings against the 'Quartodeciman' heretics, that is, those who did not observe the 'Roman' Easter.[17] However, other rulings take a more moderate stance, leading to contradictory statements, even within some recensions, on the validity of sacraments performed by those who rejected the Roman Easter.[18] Clare Stancliffe has explained this as Theodore softening his previously hard-line stance *c.*678.[19] However, only the less severe rulings appear in the recension of Theodoran penitential rulings known as the *Capitula Dacheriana*, which appears to reflect Theodore's pre-673 teaching.[20] Moreover, views represented in these penitential texts cannot simply be attributed to Theodore himself. The rulings' corrupt transmission was already recognized as a problem in the early eighth century.[21] More fundamentally, Theodore's approach to teaching involved commenting on canonical traditions he had encountered, including sharing contradictory rulings.[22] The harsher canons may represent his commentary on Eastern canonical discipline, not necessarily intended as prescriptions for contemporary England.[23]

Nonetheless, Theodore's arrival as archbishop has been considered significant in marginalizing British Christians who did not accept the Roman Easter.[24] Thomas Charles-Edwards has emphasized the paschal controversy's role in foreclosing the Britons' claim to *Romanitas* ('Roman-ness'), including in Frankish and even some Irish eyes, across the seventh century; while Theodore regarded the Britons as both

[16] Roy Flechner, 'The Making of the Canons of Theodore', *Peritia* 17–18 (2003–4), 121–43, at 123–6.

[17] *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen*, recension U [named for its eighth-century compiler, the 'Discipulus Umbrensium'; hereafter: U] 1.5.1–13; recension G [after its manuscript heading, 'Canones Gregorii'; hereafter: G] 26–28, 48–53, ed. Paul Willem Finsterwalder (Weimar, 1929), 255, 257–8, 295–7.

[18] Ibid. U 2.9.1–3; G 187, 189; recension D [the 'Capitula Dacheriana', seemingly comprising rulings given pre-673; hereafter: D] 116–17, 124 (ed. Paul Willem Finsterwalder, 248–9, 270, 323–4).

[19] Clare Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*, Jarrow Lecture 2003 (Jarrow, 2003), 16–17.

[20] Flechner, 'The Making of the Canons of Theodore', 125.

[21] Ibid. 126.

[22] Roy Flechner, 'An Insular Tradition of Ecclesiastical Law: Fifth to Eighth Century', in James Graham-Campbell and Michael Ryan, eds, *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations before the Vikings* (Oxford, 2009), 23–46, at 38–9.

[23] Compare Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*, 15.

[24] See, for instance, T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford, 2013), 239–41, 396–410; Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (University Park, PA, 1991; first publ. 1972), 112, 122–3.

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heretics and schismatics.[25] However, the treatment of Irish Christianity in Northumbria suggests that the 660s may not have marked an irrevocable turning-point in relations with those who did not observe the Roman Easter. Stancliffe developed Charles-Edwards's proposal that a 'middle party', accepting the Roman Easter but favourable towards the Irish tradition, dominated the Northumbrian church from *c.*678 until the early eighth century, suggesting that some at least of this party remained openly in communion with those who rejected the Roman Easter.[26] This article presents a similar argument for south-western Britain, suggesting that here British and English Christians maintained good relations, despite the paschal controversy. The British church only became peripheral in the 690s, when political shifts critically weakened the Britons' position.

The strongest evidence for these relationships comes from the letter written by Aldhelm to Geraint, king of Dumnonia, a British kingdom comprising Cornwall and probably most of Devon, to urge acceptance of the Roman Easter and tonsure.[27] This offers an invaluable glimpse of ecclesiastical relations in action in the early days of Theodore's archiepiscopate, decades before Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Stephen's *Vita Wilfridi* were composed. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren posited that the 672 Council of Hertford probably commissioned the letter.[28] However, Lapidge subsequently accepted Catherine Cubitt's argument that the synod responsible cannot be identified, and thus came to consider a precise dating of the letter as impossible.[29] In my view, however, Lapidge's revised position should not be accepted. As he and Herren showed, Aldhelm closely echoed Theodore's words, recorded in Hertford's *acta*. Both emphasized fidelity to the Fathers' decrees, and referred to council participants' collective discussions regarding how it could be achieved. This congruity goes beyond the general themes of charity and unity which Cubitt highlighted as far from unique to these

[25] Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 239–41, 396.
[26] T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), 320–1, 336–43; Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*, 17.
[27] Aldhelm, *Epistola ad Geruntium* [hereafter: *Ep. Ger.*], in Rudolf Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, MGH AA 15 (Berlin, 1919), 480–7; ET: *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (Cambridge, 1979), 155–60.
[28] *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 142–3.
[29] Michael Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007), 15–69, at 67–8.

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texts.[30] Further, Aldhelm's hyperbolic depiction of the council's 'innumerable' company of bishops tallies with Bede's estimation of Hertford's importance.[31] Duncan Probert's argument that the letter was written in the mid-690s relied on unsafe assumptions that this letter was the book by Aldhelm to which Bede referred, that it was composed contemporaneously with the acceptance of the Roman date for Easter by Britons under West Saxon rule, and that this took place *c.*695–7.[32] By contrast, the textual evidence adduced above suggests that the letter was indeed commissioned by Hertford. The influence of Theodore, under whom Aldhelm had studied, may also be visible in its overall approach, which was critical of certain British practices without reflecting antipathy towards the British church.

While Aldhelm's respectful tone and moderate manner have been widely recognized, Martin Grimmer adduced the letter to argue that the intolerant English mounted a hostile takeover of British churches within their territory and marginalized as heretics those British Christians whom they did not control, including Geraint's subjects.[33] However, the letter reveals more than courtesy or even respect. Particularly when viewed in its broader literary context, it shows that the West Saxon church was no more 'central' than that of the Britons, and perhaps rather less so. In south-western Britain, English and British Christian communities existed side-by-side for at least a generation after the synod of Whitby (664), the council at which the Roman Easter gained acceptance in Northumbria. This was the case, despite the fact that following the synod an important segment of Northumbrian churchmen sought actively to marginalize those Christians who did not adopt the Roman Easter.

[30] Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils* c.*650*–c.*850* (London, 1995), 63, 261.
[31] *Ep. Ger.*, 481 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 155); *HE* 4.5 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 349–53).
[32] Duncan Probert, 'New Light on Aldhelm's Letter to King Gerent of Dumnonia', in Katherine Barker and Nicholas Brooks, eds, *Aldhelm and Sherborne: Essays to Celebrate the Founding of the Bishopric* (Oxford, 2010), 110–28, at 119–23.
[33] Barbara Yorke, 'Aldhelm's Irish and British Connections', in Barker and Brooks, eds, *Aldhelm and Sherborne*, 164–80, at 176; Samuel Cardwell, '"What Sort of Love will not Speak for a Friend's Good?": Pastoral Care and Rhetoric in Early Anglo-Saxon Letters to Kings', *JMedH* 45 (2019), 405–31, at 411; Probert, 'New Light', 116; Martin Grimmer, 'Saxon Bishop and Celtic King: Interactions between Aldhelm of Wessex and Geraint of Dumnonia', *The Heroic Age* 4 (2001), electronic journal online at: <https://www.heroicage.org/issues/4/Grimmer.html>, accessed 31 August 2023.

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Aldhelm's Relationship with the Britons

Aldhelm valued ties with his British counterparts. He took for granted that West Saxon and Dumnonian clerics were in communion with each other, but bitterly lamented that 'bishops of Dyfed … glorying in the private purity of their own way of life, detest our communion to such a great extent that they disdain equally to celebrate the divine offices in church with us and to take courses of food at table for the sake of charity'.[34] Grimmer suggested that the difference between the attitudes in Dumnonia and Dyfed, a British kingdom in modern south-west Wales, to which Aldhelm alluded was merely one of degree.[35] However, a poem in which Aldhelm described staying in a monastery while passing through Cornwall seems to confirm the warmth of his relations with Dumnonian churchmen.[36] Aldhelm recalled how he prayed matins with his hosts, showing that they celebrated the liturgical hours together.[37]

Indeed, Aldhelm's letter reflects respect for British ecclesiastics well beyond simple camaraderie. Among his complaints against the clergy of Dyfed was that 'should any of us, I mean Catholics, go to live with them, they do not deign to admit us to the company of their brotherhood until we have been compelled to spend the space of forty days in penance'.[38] Aldhelm seems here to be describing adherents to Roman

[34] 'Demetarum sacerdotes de privata propriae conversationis munditia gloriantes nostram communionem magnopere abominantur in tantum, ut nec in ecclesia nobiscum orationum officia celebrare nec ad mensam ciborum fercula pro caritatis gratia pariter percipere dignentur': *Ep. Ger.*, 484 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 158).

[35] Martin Grimmer, 'Bede and the Augustine's Oak Conferences: Implications for Anglo-British Ecclesiastical Interaction in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 2 (2006), 103–19, at 116.

[36] Aldhelm, *Carmen Rhythmicum*, in Rudolf Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, MGH AA 15 (Berlin, 1919), 524–8; ET: *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, transl. Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier (Cambridge, 1985), 177–9; Probert, 'New Light', 113–14. Katherine Barker interpreted 'Usque … Domnoniam / Per … Cornubiam', as meaning 'from Cornwall to the borders of Dumnonia': Katherine Barker, '*Usque Domnoniam*: the Setting of Aldhelm's Carmen Rhythmicum, Literature, Language and the Liminal', in Barker and Brooks, eds, *Aldhelm and Sherborne*, 15–54, at 24. However, this reading seems quite forced.

[37] Aldhelm, *Carmen Rhythmicum*, 527–8 (*Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, transl. Lapidge and Rosier, 178–9).

[38] '[S]i quilibet de nostris id est catholicis ad eos habitandi gratia perrexerint, non prius ad consortium sodalitatis suae adsciscere dignantur, quam quadraginta dierum spatia in penitendo peragere compellantur': *Ep. Ger.*, 484 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 158).

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practices entering religious communities in Dyfed, perhaps renowned monasteries such as that on Ynys Bŷr (Caldey Island, Pembrokeshire). These were not necessarily West Saxons: Aldhelm's designation of them as 'Catholics' (*catholicis*) could hint that they were not, but instead British subjects of the West Saxons. What is clear is that Aldhelm saw nothing strange or reprehensible in those who shared his theological standpoint seeking to live the monastic life in Dyfed, despite the local church's non-acceptance of the Roman Easter and tonsure. This implies that Aldhelm recognized and affirmed these monasteries' reputation for holiness, and perhaps particularly the antiquity of their saints' cults and monastic tradition.

Aldhelm's respect for British monasteries seems significantly greater than that which Bede expressed for early-seventh-century Bangor. Bede's praise was juxtaposed with Æthelfrith's slaughter of its members and could be taken to demonstrate how even monastic excellence could not avert divine vengeance for their disobedience to Rome.[39] In contrast, Aldhelm's acceptance that 'Catholics' might enter monasteries in Dyfed where objectionable (to him) liturgical practices were maintained shows that he did not make continued religious fellowship conditional on the renunciation of these practices. Aldhelm's emphasis on unity seems consistent with an early, and moderate, Theodoran penitential ruling stipulating that chrism and the eucharist be given to non-conforming Britons providing they first professed their desire 'to be with us in the unity of the Church'.[40]

Even in admonishing Geraint and his Dumnonian bishops about their liturgical errors, Aldhelm avoided unequivocal affronts.[41] His primary concern, raised before Easter or the tonsure, was 'the unity of the Catholic Church and the harmony of the Christian religion, without which an indifferent faith grows sluggish and future gain is exhausted'.[42] Aldhelm's point should not be construed overly positively: it intimated that Geraint and his bishops risked a schism. Nonetheless, he avoided directly attacking their traditions and implied

[39] *HE* 2.2 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 137-143); Foley and Higham, 'Bede and the Britons', 175.
[40] '[S]e nobiscum esse in unitate aeclesie': *Die Canones Theodori*, D 124 (ed Paul Willem Finsterwalder, 249).
[41] Compare Cardwell, 'What Sort of Love?', 418; Probert, 'New Light', 116.
[42] '[E]cclesiae catholicae unitate et christianae religionis concordia, sine quibus fides otiosa torpescit et merces futura fatescit': *Ep. Ger.*, 481 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 155).

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that the English clergy sought to prevent such a rift. Aldhelm thus presented his concern about their errors as stemming from his feeling of comity towards them. Whereas Bede located the roots of their downfall in their sinful conduct after the collapse of Roman rule and their rejection of Augustine of Canterbury, for Aldhelm, the Britons' peril lay in the future.[43]

In one significant respect, Aldhelm softened potential criticism of the British church in a similar manner to Bede and the Irish. Aldhelm raised the spectre of Quartodecimanism, an Eastern heresy of which those who refused to adopt the Roman Easter were accused. Describing its adherents as a 'certain type of heretic among the Orientals', he mentioned them only in the context of the Council of Nicaea (325), without directly accusing Geraint or his bishops of Quartodecimanism.[44] Regarding the Irish, Bede omitted the charge altogether.[45] Stephen of Ripon, by contrast, accused not just the Britons and Irish, but also those English clergy who were in communion with them, of Quartodecimanism.[46] Quartodecimanism was also invoked by Theodoran penitential rulings, although none is known to derive from his earliest teaching.[47] Thus Aldhelm admonished his readers as the council had instructed him, without unequivocally alleging heresy.

Aldhelm suggested that, these matters apart, the Britons might even be superior to the West Saxons as Christians. Having attacked the particularly stringent line taken by British churchmen in Dyfed, calling them Pharisees, Aldhelm referred to Christ's example in forgiving the reformed sinner, or prostitute, mentioned in Luke's Gospel, who was associated with Mary Magdalene.[48] Probert's suggestion that she represented the Britons cannot be accepted.[49] She was contrasted with the Pharisees, who represented the misguidedly rigorist clergy of Dyfed, excessively proud of their pristine traditions. She was not a Pharisee who had moved from pride to true faith, as Nicodemus had,

[43] Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 8.
[44] '[G]enus quoddam hereticorum aput orientales': *Ep. Ger.*, 483–4 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 157–8).
[45] Alan Thacker, 'Bede and the Irish', in L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald, Beda Venerabilis: *Historian, Monk & Northumbrian* (Groningen, 1996), 31–59, at 38–40.
[46] *VW* 12, 14–15 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 25, 31–3); Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*, 6.
[47] *Die Canones Theodori*, U 1.5.3; G 48, 53 (ed Paul Willem Finsterwalder, 257–8, 295).
[48] *Ep. Ger.*, 485 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 159); Luke 7: 37–50; Philip Almond, *Mary Magdalene: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2022), 3, 58.
[49] Probert, 'New Light', 118.

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but instead represented those belatedly converted from depravity and sinfulness.[50] Thus, the repentant sinner symbolized Aldhelm's people, so recently converted from paganism.

Paganism and the Britons

The explanation for Aldhelm's startling analogy can be found in a British hagiography, *Vita Samsonis*, which provides a valuable insight into the seventh-century British church.[51] The extant text seems to have been compiled in Brittany in the later seventh or very early eighth century, reworking an earlier *Vita* composed *c.*600 in Cornwall.[52] Material cannot be specifically assigned to the original text, but the Breton writer stressed his reliance on mainland British tradition and had visited sites in Britain associated with this Samson.[53] An anecdote related by *Vita Samsonis* seems to reflect British attitudes to, and polemics against, paganism, probably in mainland Britain as well as Brittany.

En route to Brittany, Samson passed through Cornwall, where he came across 'men worshipping a certain idol after the custom of the Bacchantes'.[54] Appalled, he observed their veneration of this 'abominable image'.[55] The language used here is strikingly similar to the terms in which Aldhelm's writings depicted paganism. Aldhelm consistently focused on idols and images, portrayed worshippers as Bacchic revellers and generally avoided mentioning pagan gods. His account of the fourth-century Egyptian ascetic Apollonius in his prose treatise *De virginitate* offers a good example of this approach. Aldhelm's source, Rufinus's *Historia Monachorum*, had described paganism as 'demon-worship', instantiated in the 'demonic superstition' of a god's

[50] See John 3: 1–2.
[51] See Nancy Edwards, 'Perspectives on Conversion in Wales', in Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, eds, *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World: Converting the Isles* (Turnhout, 2016), 93–107, at 94.
[52] Lynette Olson, 'Introduction: "Getting Somewhere" with the First Life of St Samson of Dol', in eadem, ed., *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales* (Woodbridge, 2017), 1–18; Richard Sowerby, 'The Lives of St Samson: Rewriting the Ambitions of a Medieval Cult', *Francia* 38 (2011), 1–31, at 28–30.
[53] Sowerby, 'Lives of St Samson', 29.
[54] '[H]omines bachantum ritu quoddam fanum … adorantes': *Vita Samsonis* 48, ed. Pierre Flobert, *La Vie ancienne de Saint Samson de Dol* (Paris, 1997), 216; ET: *The Life of St. Samson of Dol*, transl. Thomas Taylor (Felinfach, 1991), 49.
[55] '[S]imulacrum abominabile': *Vita Samsonis* 48, ed. Flobert, *La Vie ancienne*, 216 (*Life of St. Samson*, transl. Taylor, 49).

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temple.[56] In Aldhelm's account, however, Apollonius encountered 'some crowds of pagans revelling [*debachantes*] everywhere around an effigy'.[57] The cult-image was merely 'the worthless statue of their idol'.[58] While praising the early martyr Julian, Aldhelm again employed terminology for pagan worship closely similar to that used by *Vita Samsonis*, referring to 'more than five hundred impious statues of idols, to which temple-priests were offering incense, offering up libations like dervishes [*bachantum ritu*]'.[59] Similarly, Aldhelm's account of the martyrdom of Cosmas and Damian avoided explicitly mentioning pagan gods, attributing it rather to unwillingness 'to burn incense at the petty little statues of the pagans'.[60] Thus, Aldhelm repeatedly imposed on his material an understanding of paganism as idolatry strikingly similar to the line taken by *Vita Samsonis.*

This use of *bacchari* and *debacchari* (both meaning 'to rage' or 'rave', with strong Bacchic connotations) to describe pagan worship was absent from Aldhelm's main patristic sources, notably Augustine and Jerome, and lacks parallels in other texts to which he had access.[61] Gildas, for instance, used *debacchari* to depict Maximus's fourth-century usurpation.[62] Venantius Fortunatus used it for drunken merriment.[63] Gregory of Tours – whom Aldhelm never cited – used the word frequently, but for demonic possession and its consequences, rather than for pagan worship.[64] The usage found in Aldhelm seemingly enjoyed very limited

[56] '[C]ulturam daemonum', 'daemoniaca superstitio': Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum*, 7.2.1, 7.7.1, in *Tyrannius Rufinus: Historia Monachorum sive de Vita Sanctorum Patrum*, ed. Eva Schulz-Flügel, (Berlin, 1990), 287, 294; ET: *Inquiry about the Monks in Egypt*, transl. Andrew Cain (Washington, DC, 2019), 105, 111.

[57] '[G]entilium turmas circumquaque … debachantes': Aldhelm, *De Virginitate Prosa* 38, ed. Scott Gwara, *Aldhelmi Malmesbiriensis Prosa de Virginitate: cum Glosa Latina atque Anglosaxonica* (Turnhout, 2001), 559; ET: *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 59–132, at 104.

[58] '[F]rivolam simulacri effigiem': ibid.

[59] '[N]efandas simulacrorum effigies plus quam quingentas, quibus pontifices delubrorum libamina litantes bachantum ritu turificabant': ibid. 36, ed. Gwara, 511–13 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 101).

[60] '[A]d turificandum statunculis ethnicorum': ibid, 34, ed. Gwara, 443 (*Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 95).

[61] Compare Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), 178–91.

[62] *DEB* 13 (ed. and transl. Michael Winterbottom, 21 [ET], 93).

[63] Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina, praefatio* 5, ed. Marc Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat. Poèmes – livres I–IV* (Paris, 1994), 5.

[64] Gregory of Tours, *Vitae Patrum* 4.4, 16.4, 17.4, ed. Giselle de Nie, *Gregory of Tours: Lives and Miracles* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 54, 232, 248; idem, *Liber de Virtutibus Sancti Martini* 2.20, 2.25, 4.21, ed. de Nie, *Gregory of Tours*, 572, 582, 808; idem,

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contemporary currency. Bede's use of *debacchari* to depict Cadwallon of Gwynedd's onslaught against the Northumbrians came in a passage apparently inspired by Gildas's treatment of Maximus, while his verse *Life of Cuthbert* used *bacchari* of demonic possession.[65] The West Saxon cleric Boniface used *bachari* to add colour to a depiction of greed, with no hint of pagan worship.[66] Therefore, the characterization of idolatry as Bacchic revelry was unusual. That it features in both *Vita Samsonis* and Aldhelm's writings suggests that British discourse on paganism influenced Aldhelm.

West Saxon texts also represented arguments against paganism in the same way as *Vita Samsonis*. *Vita Samsonis* showed the saint upbraiding the idolaters that 'they ought not to forsake the one God who created all things and worship an idol'.[67] Similar lines of argument featured consistently in West Saxon writings. In the early eighth century, Bishop Daniel of Winchester advised Boniface, then missionizing among continental pagans, to contrast their 'begotten gods' with the universe's need for a creator.[68] Aldhelm's student Æthilwald expressed the same contrast in a poem for his friend Offa, an East Saxon sub-king who abdicated in 709. He dismissed the pagan gods from whom early English royal houses claimed descent and emphasized the Christian God's role as creator.[69] The similarities between *Vita Samsonis*'s perspective on paganism and those expressed by West Saxon authors are clear, involving both terminology and ideas. These parallels could derive from British criticism of West Saxon paganism, before Wessex's mid-seventh-century conversion and perhaps even thereafter.

A further indication that Aldhelm was familiar with British critiques of paganism emerges from his letter to Heahfrith, a prospective student.

Decem Libri Historiarum 7.35, 8.34, 10.25, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH SRM 1.1 (Hanover, 1951), 356, 403, 519.

[65] *HE* 2.20; Charles-Edwards, 'Bede, the Irish', 46–7; Bede, *Vita Metrica S. Cudbercti* 13, ed. Michael Lapidge, *Bede's Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 2020), 234–5.

[66] Boniface, *Aenigmata* 13, in *The Old English and Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition*, ed. Andy Orchard (Cambridge, MA, 2021), 208.

[67] '[N]e idolum, unum Deum qui creavit omnia relinquentes, colere deberent': *Vita Samsonis* 48, ed. Flobert, *La Vie ancienne*, 216 (*Life of St. Samson*, transl. Taylor, 49).

[68] '[G]enitis diis': *Die Briefe des Heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus* 23, ed. Michael Tangl, MGH Epp. Sel. 1 (Berlin, 1916), 39; ET: *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, transl. Ephraim Emerton (New York, 2000), 26.

[69] Æthilwald, *Carmina Rhythmica* 4; ET in: Brent Miles, ed. and transl., 'The *Carmina Rhythmica* of Æthilwald: Edition, Translation, and Commentary', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 14 (2004), 73–117, at 95.

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In a rare depiction of early English paganism, Aldhelm described how 'once the crude pillars of the same foul snake and the stag were worshipped with coarse stupidity'.[70] He borrowed 'coarse stupidity' from Gildas's description of the pagan Balaam cursing the Israelites, while the statement as a whole recalls Gildas's portrayal of Romano-British idolatry.[71] Aldhelm had probably read Gildas during his early education and his considerable literary debt to him suggests Aldhelm's respect for British scholarship.[72] Aldhelm may even have brought *De Excidio Britanniae* to Theodore's school at Canterbury, where he was among the earliest students, and where *De Excidio* was used for Latin teaching and as a rare Latin source for the *Laterculus Malalianus*, a theological text which its editor has described as 'an historical exegesis of the life of Christ'.[73] Stancliffe's hypothesis that Bede acquired information about Augustine of Canterbury's second encounter with British bishops from a British text preserved at Malmesbury further suggests West Saxon interest in British perspectives on recent ecclesiastical history.[74] Aldhelm's awareness that Britons had criticized West Saxon paganism implies that he would not have shared Bede's assessment of their greatest sin, failing to preach to the English.[75]

Aldhelm's consciousness of British perspectives on paganism thus provides the context for his presentation of the West Saxons as the repentant sinner. He acknowledged thereby that the Britons had been Christians much longer and that he risked ridicule by criticizing British liturgical practice when the West Saxons were recent pagans. The metaphor was, however, also subtly threatening. Aldhelm quoted Christ's rebuke of the Pharisees for judging the sinful woman.[76] Moreover, her frequent identification as Mary Magdalene, who stood

[70] '[P]ridem eiusdem nefandae natricis ermula cervulusque cruda … colebantur stoliditate': Aldhelm, *Epistola ad Ehfridum*, in Rudolf Ehwald, ed., *Aldhelmi Opera*, MGH AA 15 (Berlin, 1919), 488–94, at 488; ET: *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, transl. Lapidge and Herren, 160–4, at 161.

[71] Neil Wright, 'Aldhelm, Gildas and Acircius', in idem, *History and Literature in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West* (Aldershot, 1995), n.p. [1–28], 7 [NB: the volume's pagination is not continuous].

[72] Compare ibid.; Yorke, 'Aldhelm's Irish', 175.

[73] Brian Christopher Hardison, 'Words, Meanings and Readings: Reconstructing the Use of Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae* at the Canterbury School', *Viator* 47 (2015), 1–22.

[74] Clare Stancliffe, 'The British Church and the Mission of Augustine', in Richard Gameson, ed., *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud, 1999), 107–51, at 126–8.

[75] Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 5, 8.

[76] *Ep. Ger.*, 485 (Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 159).

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by Christ's cross and became the first witness to his resurrection, hinted that the West Saxons could achieve far greater honour than the Britons, their earlier sins notwithstanding.[77] If some Britons, at least, were ill-fated Pharisees, the West Saxons stood for the fresh start Christ offered sinners. They attained this status as adherents to Roman practices and members of the universal Church. Implicit within Aldhelm's superficially humble metaphor was Bede's later perception of the Britons as having forfeited their divine election, though, in contrast to Bede's generalized denunciation, Aldhelm's perspective seems narrowly concerned with specific shortcomings.

Indeed, Aldhelm sought to appropriate the Britons' Christian heritage, which he did not consider fundamentally compromised. Aldhelm staked a claim to British Christianity by stressing that he wrote at the behest of 'an episcopal council, where, out of almost the entirety of Britain an innumerable company of the bishops of God came together'.[78] This description was scarcely accurate. Only five bishops seem to have attended the Council of Hertford, all from south-eastern and south-central Britain, representing churches in the early English kingdoms of Kent, East Anglia, Mercia and Wessex.[79] Moreover, the council apparently acknowledged that its jurisdiction only encompassed Canterbury's ecclesiastical province, excluding the Northumbrian see at York.[80] The salience of Aldhelm's claim stemmed from its assertion that a single British church existed, from which he hoped that the Britons would not separate.

Bede also appropriated Britain's Christian heritage, particularly in Book I of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.[81] However, whereas Aldhelm seems to have associated the Britons with an image of sinful Israel indirectly, Bede did so unambiguously. He compared the Germanic migration to Britain with the Babylonian conquest following Israel and Judah's long moral decline, again borrowing the analogy from Gildas,[82] but

[77] Compare Matt. 27: 56, 28: 1–10; Mark 15: 40, 16: 1–11; Luke 24: 1–11; John 19: 25, 20: 1–18.
[78] '[C]oncilio episcoporum, ubi ex tota paene Brittania innumerabilis Dei sacerdotum caterva confluxit': *Ep. Ger.*, 481 (Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 155).
[79] *HE* 4.5 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 349–51).
[80] Alan Thacker, 'Wilfrid: His Cult and his Biographer', inNicholas J. Higham, ed., *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint* (Donington, 2013), 1–16, at 6–7.
[81] *HE* 1.16–1.22 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 53-69).
[82] *HE* 1.15 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 53); *DEB* 24 (ed. and transl. Michael Winterbottom, 27, 97–8).

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using Gildas quite differently to Aldhelm. Whereas Aldhelm had respected Gildas as an authoritative Christian teacher, in line with contemporary British and Irish opinion, Bede reframed his prophetic lament as historical description, asserting that their 'unspeakable crimes … Gildas their own historian describes in doleful words'.[83] Treating Gildas as an historian allowed Bede to argue that the Britons had forfeited their position through their sinfulness.[84] Aldhelm's letter shows that the seeds of this logic had been sown in Wessex by the late seventh century, but had not yet fully germinated. West Saxon Christianity's relative novelty remained the dominant context for church relations, while Aldhelm continued to respect the British Christian tradition.

Rome as Centre

Given this religious environment, Aldhelm's criticisms of British practice required him to appeal beyond local tradition and authority, grounds on which the Britons were undeniably stronger. Thus, he framed his argument in Roman terms, adjuring Geraint 'that you no longer detest with swollen pride of heart and with scornful breast the doctrine and decrees of blessed Peter'.[85] The letter repeatedly appealed to Petrine and Roman authority, which both Bede and Stephen of Ripon suggested had been decisive at Whitby.[86] Aldhelm concluded his letter with a reference to Christ's entrustment of the keys to Peter and his naming him as the rock on which the church was built.[87] According to Bede, Wilfrid similarly rested his case with the entrustment of the keys to Peter.[88] Aldhelm also criticized the Dumnonians

[83] '[I]nenarrabilium scelerum facta … historicus eorum Gildas flebili sermone describit': *HE* 1.22 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 69); Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 2–11. See also Stephen J. Joyce, *The Legacy of Gildas: Constructions of Authority in the Early Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 2022), 36–42.

[84] *HE* 1.22, 2.2 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 69, 141–3); Cardwell, 'The People Whom He Foreknew', 42.

[85] '[U]t ulterius doctrinam et decreta beati Petri contumaci cordis supercilio et protervo pectore non abominemini': *Ep. Ger.*, 485 (Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 159).

[86] *HE* 3.25 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 294–309); *VW* 10 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 21–3).

[87] *Ep. Ger.*, 485–6 (Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 159–60).

[88] *HE* 3.25 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 306–7); compare *VW* 10 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 23).

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for rejecting 'the tonsure of St Peter, prince of the apostles' and for not observing Easter in line with the Council of Nicaea, whose participants were 'the bishops of the Roman church'.[89]

Aldhelm's insistence on an all-encompassing understanding of Petrine authority implies that he knew it would strike Dumnonian readers as novel and unwarranted. Indeed, *Vita Samsonis* articulated an ecclesiology based on an annual episcopal synod.[90] The Britons' response to Augustine also emphasized synodical governance, while Gildas applied Christ's grant of the keys to Peter to every 'holy bishop'.[91] Aldhelm's criticism of British liturgical customs, from a consciously marginal position in terms of tradition and authority, needed to redefine ecclesial centres and peripheries. The similarities between his approach and that attributed to Wilfrid may be connected to Agilbert, who was both Wilfrid's senior colleague at Whitby and bishop of Wessex during Aldhelm's youth.[92]

Aldhelm may also have been influenced by Theodore's introduction of a significant ecclesiological development to the insular world. The contemporary papacy actively promoted Rome's significance as a holy city and its own unique status as the 'institutionalization' of Christ and the apostles' work, via the apostolic succession.[93] Papal claims to be defending orthodoxy were central to a bitter mid-seventh-century rift with Constantinople over Monotheletism, which the emperors promoted as a Christological compromise to heal the Eastern split over Miaphysitism. Pope Martin I was arrested in 649 for his opposition to imperial religious policy and died in exile, leading to his veneration as a martyr. The venerable monk-theologian Maximus was subsequently seized from Rome and exiled, dying following the mutilation of his arm.[94] Theodore belonged to the same circle as Maximus and was present in Rome as these shocking

[89] '[T]onsuram sancti Petri, apostolorum principis'; 'ecclesiae Romanae pontifices': *Ep. Ger.*, 482–3 (Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 156–7).
[90] *Vita Samsonis* 42–3, ed. Flobert, *La Vie ancienne*, 206–10 (*Life of St. Samson*, transl. Taylor, 43–5).
[91] Stancliffe, 'The British Church', 132–3.
[92] *HE* 3.7, 3.25 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 298–301); *VW* 10 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 21).
[93] Rosamund McKitterick, *Rome and the Invention of the Papacy* (Cambridge, 2020), 35–6, 228.
[94] W. Trent Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus'* Life of Bishop Wilfrid: *An Early English Saint's Life* (Lampeter, 1992), 80–3, 99; Catherine Cubitt, 'Appendix 2: The Chronology of Stephen's Life of Wilfrid', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, 334–47, at 342.

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events unfolded.[95] Their consequence was a new definition of *Romanitas* as theological orthodoxy in line with papal Rome. This obviated the significance of the Britons' own ancient tradition and their status as (arguably former) imperial *cives*.[96] Obedience to papal Rome provided Aldhelm's argument's touchstone, notwithstanding his respect for British Christianity.

Thus, in south-western Britain *c.*672, neither British nor English Christians could effectively establish a claim to ecclesiastical centrality. The Britons' much longer Christian tradition was being undercut by the increasing emphasis on papal authority. The West Saxons were recent converts, and their ecclesiological assertions had limited efficacy faced with a local church confident in its own bishops' authority. Aldhelm's response was to preserve strong ties with the Britons, even while articulating an ecclesiology which pushed them to the margins.

The Britons become Peripheral

From the 690s, the Britons' political failure seems to have rendered the British church peripheral, no longer a recognized counterpart to the church of the West Saxons, to which it was losing adherents. The West Saxons had encroached westwards for much of the seventh century, apparently winning key victories over the Britons in 658 and 682.[97] The chronology of this expansion cannot be determined precisely, but Wessex's primary mid-century concern remained the Mercian threat.[98] The career of Ceadwalla – the best-documented seventh-century West Saxon ruler by far – indicates that in the late 680s, Wessex's key interests lay further east. Ceadwalla conquered Sussex, Surrey and the Isle of Wight and clashed with Kent.[99] Only under his successor Ine (r. 689–726) was Wessex able to concentrate on the

[95] Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), 135–6.
[96] Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, 239–41.
[97] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [hereafter: *ASC*], *s.a.* 658 and 682, in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, ed. David Dumville and Simon Keynes, 9 vols (with a volume for each textual variant, customarily designated by letters) (Cambridge, 1983–2005), A: 30, 32; B: 21, 23; C: 39, 41; E: 29, 33; Probert, 'New Light', 111–12; Bruce Eagles, *From Roman Civitas to Anglo-Saxon Shire: Topographical Studies on the Formation of Wessex* (Oxford, 2018), 139.
[98] Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995), 57–62; D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, rev. edn (London, 2000; first publ. 1991), 46–9.
[99] *HE* 4.15–4.16 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 381–5).

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Britons to its west.[100] The frontier zone probably consisted of multiple, localized borders between 'Englishries' and 'Britishries', meaning that increasing numbers of British communities and their churches fell under West Saxon rule.[101] Early in his reign, Ine issued a law code which codified his British subjects' second-class status and provided for their assets' long-term transfer to the English, through ethnically-differentiated compensation tariffs.[102] Military, legal and economic repression seems to have been matched by a harsher political culture. John-Henry Clay has argued that Ine promoted a dynastic identity founded upon the Britons' defeat and dispossession, traced back to Cerdic centuries earlier.[103]

This deteriorating socio-political situation may have engendered serious ecclesiastical consequences.[104] Bede praised Aldhelm, because he 'led many of those Britons who were subject to the West Saxons to adopt the catholic celebration of the Easter of the Lord'.[105] That is, Aldhelm converted residents of 'Britishries' under West Saxon control, presumably in tandem with their secular subordination.[106] Although the passage only dates their conversion to the period of Aldhelm's abbacy, it may be possible to situate it more specifically. Three chapters earlier, Bede had referred to the adoption of the Roman Easter by 'the greater part of the Irish in Ireland and some of the Britons in Britain'.[107] These may be the same Britons, namely many of

[100] Thus John-Henry Clay's proposal that the Gewisse 'annexed' Dorset, Somerset and Devon during 652–61 cannot be accepted: John-Henry Clay, '*Adventus*, Warfare, and the Britons in the Development of West Saxon Identity', in Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann, eds, *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West* (Turnhout, 2013), 169–213, at 191.

[101] Barker, '*Usque Domnoniam*: Sherborne', 91–2; Alex Woolf, 'Apartheid and Economics in Anglo-Saxon England', in Nicholas J. Higham, ed., *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2007), 115–29, at 128; Eagles, *From Roman Civitas*, 138. Linguistic data may corroborate such socio-cultural enclaves: Duncan Probert, 'Mapping Early Medieval Language Change in South-West England', in Higham, ed., *Britons*, at 231–44, at 243.

[102] Woolf, 'Apartheid and Economics', 127–9; Martin Grimmer, 'Britons in Early Wessex: The Evidence of the Law Code of Ine', in Higham, ed., *Britons*, 102–14.

[103] Clay, '*Adventus*, Warfare', 202–4.

[104] Woolf, 'Apartheid and Economics', 127–9.

[105] '[M]ultos … eorum, qui Occidentalibus Saxonibus subditi erant Brettones, ad catholicam dominici paschae celebrationem … perduxit': *HE* 5.18 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 515). See Stancliffe, 'The British Church', 110; Cardwell, 'What Sort of Love?', 407.

[106] Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, 428. Compare Probert, 'New Light', 115; Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 17.

[107] '[P]lurima pars Scottorum in Hibernia, et nonnulla etiam de Brettonibus in Brittania': *HE* 5.15 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 505).

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those under West Saxon rule.[108] Charles-Edwards suggested that the 'Quo tempore' which opened this chapter referred to Theodore's death in 690.[109] However, Theodore's death's significance as the chronological anchor to which it might refer seems diluted by the precise dates for his successor's election, consecration and enthronement in 692–3 which Bede had also provided.[110] Probert proposed Willibrord's consecration, which Bede dated to 696. Probert argued that the northern Irish probably adopted the Roman Easter in 697, based on the presence of Adomnán of Iona at the Synod of Birr.[111] However, Armagh had apparently done so by 688, undermining the case for Irish and British conversions *c.*695–7.[112] All that can be shown is that Bede located these conversions in the 690s or perhaps late 680s. If the Britons in question were those converted by Aldhelm, he was apparently able to take a much more direct and successful approach in this period than he had done in *c.*672, which would be consistent with the Britons' weakened socio-political position.

The Britons' situation continued to worsen thereafter, with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* depicting warfare between Ine and Geraint in 710, the year after Aldhelm died. This may provide the context for Geraint's grant of an estate in Cornwall to the West Saxon church at Sherborne (Dorset), further suggesting that the English church was becoming established as the ecclesiastical centre.[113] Charles-Edwards interpreted the *Annales Cambriae*'s reference to a battle among the *Cornuenses* in 722 as suggesting that Dumnonia probably fell to the West Saxons in the early eighth century.[114] Thus, from the 690s, the south-western Britons' political standing was in decline for a generation. By contrast, Aldhelm's letter to Geraint did not speak to total Dumnonian disintegration. Aldhelm wrote before it was clearly established, theologically or politically, who was peripheral, and at a time when Theodore's ideas still seemed novel, thus further strengthening the case that it was commissioned by the Council of Hertford.

[108] Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, 403.
[109] Ibid. 403 n. 135.
[110] *HE* 5.8 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 473–5).
[111] Probert, 'New Light', 121.
[112] Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 428.
[113] *ASC*, *s.a.* 710 (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Dumville and Keynes, A: 33; B: 24; C: 43; D: 10; E: 35); *Charters of Sherborne*, ed. M. A. O'Donovan (Oxford, 1988), xlii, xlviii, 81; Barker, '*Usque Domnoniam*: Sherborne', 82–3.
[114] *Annales Cambriae*, *s.a.* 722, in *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and transl. John Morris (London, 1980), 45–9, 85–91; Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, 429–30.

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Wider Perspectives

Neither the British nor the West Saxon church was marginalized in south-western Britain until the Britons' political collapse, seemingly in the 690s and early years of the eighth century. In the 670s and probably also the 680s, ecclesiastical relations were far from the antipathy represented by Bede and Stephen. West Saxon attitudes to British Christianity in this period appear comparable to those many Northumbrians held towards the Irish tradition. Aldhelm respected the Britons intellectually and shared hospitality with them, while some adherents of Roman practice were sufficiently attracted by British monasticism to undertake penance and enter a British monastery. West Saxon clerics remained in communion with their British neighbours and, to some extent, continued to respect their claim, as long-standing Christians, to a certain spiritual centrality. Aldhelm, at least, remained conscious that the Britons had been Christian long before his own people and had made forceful criticisms of paganism. His letter recognized the British church's tradition, while nonetheless demanding full conformity with papal Rome, the centre of authority.

The South-West may not have been typical, as substantial regional variation seems likely.[115] Nonetheless, this study shows that here, at least, the 660s was not a caesura in relations between adherents of the two Easters and tonsures. Moreover, the career of Wine, Wessex's most infamous early bishop, may imply that the early English more widely continued to respect the British church into the 670s.

Apart from two brief references in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Wine is only known from Bede's *History*, which painted a deeply unflattering portrait.[116] Bede's most serious charges were that, having left Wessex, Wine purchased the see of London and that he had earlier consecrated Chad bishop with the assistance of two British co-consecrators, rendering Chad's orders defective.[117] Yet, as this article has argued, when Wine requested his British confrères' assistance, concelebration with clergy from the British church was unproblematic in the South-West. Wine made that request to comply with the Council of Nicaea's requirement for at least three episcopal consecrators, reiterated in

[115] See Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, 17.
[116] *ASC*, *s.a.* 656 (E text only) and *s.a.* 660 (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Dumville and Keynes, E: 29–30; and A: 30; B: 21; C: 39).
[117] *HE* 3.7, 3.28; 4.2, 4.12 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 235, 317, 335, 369). Compare *VW* 15 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 33).

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Gregory the Great's *Libellus Responsionum*, regarded as authoritative in the contemporary English church.[118] Wine's appointment as bishop of London by Wulfhere of Mercia seems murkier. Barbara Yorke initially suggested that, while still Wessex's bishop, Wine had colluded with Wulfhere, its archenemy, but more recently has presented Wine as a victim of Mercian abduction.[119] The allegation of simony seems a later imputation. Aldhelm told Geraint that his clerics' un-Roman style of tonsure was devised by Simon Magus.[120] As attitudes towards the Britons hardened, the charge of simony might have been levelled against the defector Wine in view of his co-operation with British colleagues.

The unreliability of the simony charge indicates that Wine's collaboration with British bishops did not make him unsuitable for the episcopate in Wulfhere's eyes, suggesting that late 660s Mercian attitudes to the British church may not have been dissimilar to those in Wessex. However, following Theodore's arrival in 669, Wine's actions must have appeared more questionable, as the new archbishop insisted that Chad's consecration be regularized, due to the British bishops' participation.[121] Nonetheless, Theodore's view of Wine is hard to gauge. He was not removed as bishop of London, yet did not attend the Council of Hertford.[122] In eighth-century Northumbria, Bede and Stephen presented Chad's consecration and, in Bede's case, Wine himself, as profoundly problematic.[123] The transformation of

[118] *HE* 1.27 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 87); Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1: *Nicaea I to Lateran V* (London, 1990), 7; Flechner, 'An Insular Tradition', 32–7; Michael Elliot, 'New Evidence for the Influence of Gallic Canon Law in Anglo-Saxon England', *JEH* 64 (2013), 700–30, at 706. Compare Grimmer, 'Bede', 117 n. 66.

[119] Yorke, *Wessex*, 172; eadem, 'Competition for the Solent and 7th-century Politics', in Ben Jervis, ed., *The Middle Ages Revisited* (Oxford, 2018), 35–43 at 38.

[120] *Ep. Ger.*, 482 (Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, 156–7).

[121] *HE* 4.2 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 335); *VW* 15 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 33). Stancliffe argued that Stephen of Ripon's account, in which Chad was fully reordained by Theodore and Wilfrid, was probably accurate, rather than Bede's, in which he was not, citing reasons why Bede would have suggested reconciliation rather than reordination: Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*, 16. However, the *Capitula Dacheriana* recension of Theodore's Penitential contains only the ruling requiring reconciliation, not that requiring reordination, while Aldhelm's letter and poem, by condoning joint liturgy, assumed the validity of Britons' orders. It therefore seems more likely that Theodore reconciled Chad, in line with Bede's account.

[122] *HE* 3.7, 4.5 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 235, 349–51).

[123] *HE* 3.7, 4.2 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, 235, 335); *VW* 14–15 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 31–3).

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attitudes towards the British church was gradual, yet radical. Recognizing that, Bede's twin imputations against Wine should be set aside. Wine's career suggests that, after Whitby and even after Theodore's arrival, his concelebration with British bishops was not generally seen as blameworthy.

An obscure comment in Stephen's *Life of Wilfrid* may suggest that, notwithstanding the strength of eighth-century anti-British discourse in Northumbria, even there, relations were not unambiguously antagonistic in the late seventh century. After Wilfrid's release from prison in Dunbar, East Lothian, in 681, 'he was driven from his own province in such a way that no rest was allowed him even in the land of strangers on either side of the sea, wherever the power of Ecgfrith prevailed'.[124] This suggests that Wilfrid considered exile on both sides of the Firth of Forth, in Pictish and British territory.[125] Although Wilfrid's monastic confederation had expanded among the Britons, Picts and Scots, the possibility of his exile there seems not to have been considered, perhaps due to his self-presentation as an arch-romanist.[126] Nonetheless, on a recent visit to Rome, Wilfrid had subscribed to the anti-Monothelete synod on behalf of 'all the northern part of Britain and Ireland and the islands, which are inhabited by the races of Angles and Britons as well as Scots and Picts'.[127] This suggests that he saw himself in some form of ecclesial relation to British Christians. This could be simply staking a claim for York to be recognized as the metropolitan see for northern Britain and Ireland because of local churches' heterodoxy on Easter.[128]

[124] '[D]e propria provincia expulsus erat, ita ut nec in aliena regione ultra vel citra mare, ubi potestas Ecgfrithi praevaluit, requiem habere permiserit': *VW* 41 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 81).

[125] Stephen of Ripon's account of Wilfrid's first imprisonment had a certain British undertone, giving British names for two places under Northumbrian control: *Dynbaer* (Dunbar) and *Broninis*: *VW* 36, 38 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 73, 77); Leslie Alcock, *Bede, Eddius and the Forts of the North Britons*, Jarrow Lecture 1988 (Jarrow, 1988), 4–6. Andrew Breeze proposed that *Broninis* means 'meadow hill' and was Durham's British name: Andrew Breeze, 'Was Durham the *Broninis* of Eddius's Life of St Wilfrid?', in Richard Coates and Andrew Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places* (Stamford, 2000), 147–9.

[126] *VW* 21 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 43).

[127] '[O]mni aquilonali parte Brittanniae et Hiberniae insulisque quae ab Anglorum et Brittonum necnon Scottorum et Pictorum gentibus colebantur': *VW* 53 (*Life*, ed. Colgrave, 115).

[128] T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Wilfrid and the Celts', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, 243–59, at 257–9.

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Indeed, Wilfrid's monastic family's northward expansion seems to have been associated with Northumbrian imperialism.[129] Nevertheless, Wilfrid apparently considered British and Pictish areas to be potentially suitable places of exile. While in his eyes undoubtedly peripheral, the Britons were not yet entirely beyond the pale.

[129] Ibid.; Sarah Foot, 'Wilfrid's Monastic Empire', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, 27–39, at 33–5.

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