3-6-03

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY TO BRITAIN

THE EARLIEST FOUNDATIONS OF ANGLICAN CHRISTIANITY

THE ROMANO-BRITISH CHURCH *(For terminology, see JRW essay)*

The concept of Anglicanism

1. HOW?

intent of missionaries

Britain was a Roman colony c. AD 43-410, and it seems most probable that the Christian faith entered Britain through normal Roman contacts, either via the army or by trade-routes with Gaul and the Mediterranean, i.e. by ordinary intercourse with the outside world rather than as the result of some specially planned mission from elsewhere. Some confirmation for this is afforded by recent geographical studies of the locations of Roman roads in relation to the place-names of probable Christian communities that may have had church buildings, by Kenneth Cameron. These show that there is a marked coincidence of the former network of Roman roads with the locations of the twenty-some surviving place-names that begin with the word eccles- (or eggles-, both of which derive from ecclesia = church): Eccles- ton, -all, -hall, -hill, -cliffe, -field, -wall. (cf. map in Barley & Hanson).

The Glastonbury Legends: a complex of medieval legends, none dating before about 1200, all purporting to bolster the claim of Glastonbury, rather than Canterbury, to be the ancient center of British Christianity. The Glastonbury legends focus upon St. Joseph of Arimathea, and assert that he was sent there by St. Phillip c. 63 AD as the head of a band of missionaries, bringing with him the Holy Grail (chalice used by JC at Last Supper) and causing the Glastonbury thornbush to grow miraculously either from his own staff or from a thorn of the Lord's own crown that he had brought with him. Other related legends about Glastonbury: the Lord Jesus himself came there as a youth between ages 12 and 30 to find a spot for the future church which Joseph was to build there; St. Peter preached there, Paul made a missionary journey there, the Blessed Virgin was buried there, King Arthur established there his haven of Avalon and was buried there, St. Patrick made his residence there, etc. Earliest written evidence for any of these legends is in the Chronicle of William of Malmesbury (written c. 1125-30) in an addition anonymously c. 1200 and connected with an effort to rehabilitate the prestige of Glastonbury (about which William wrote) after a disastrous fire had destroyed much of it. These legends are now generally discredited by historians, although a former vicar of Glastonbury L.S. Lewis has written in their defense. It is true, of course, that Glastonbury was from ancient times an active seaport, such as could have served for the entry of a new religion into Britain, and so it is at least conceivable that the legends of British Christian origins there may point to more truth than evidence can prove.

2. WHEN? EARLIEST WRITTEN EVIDENCE

1. Tertullian, Treatise against the Jews (Adversus Judaeos), viii, written c. 208 AD: says that "parts of Britain, inaccessible to the

Romans, were indeed conquered by Christ." ("Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca"; MPL 2,850).

2. Origen, writing c. 240, includes Britain among those places where Christians are to be found: a) Commentary on Psalm 149: "The divine goodness of our Lord and Saviour is equally diffused among the Britons, the Africans, and other nations of the world." b) Fourth Homily on Ezekiel vi: "For when did the land of the Britons before the advent of Christ consent to the religion of one God?... But now because of the churches, which occupy the bounds of the world, the whole earth with joy calls to the Lord of Israel." c) Homily vi on Luke 1:24: "The grace of our Lord and Saviour is ever with those who are cast off from our world in Britain, and with those who are in Mauretania, and with all under the sun who have believed in his name. See therefore the goodness of the Saviour, how it is spread over the whole world." Cf. also Homily on Matthew vi.

3. It seems probable from these references, therefore, that there were a number of Christians in Britain by around 200 AD, and thus that Christianity came into Britain at least during the later 2nd century AD. Perhaps some fled there from the persecutions in Gaul under Marcus Aurelius in 177 AD (cf. Eusebius V, pp. 193-205), although there is no evidence for this. In late 2nd and early 3rd century Britain, of course, Christianity would have been but one of a number of popular religions there at that time, including the state supported emperor worship, the traditional Roman pantheon, Mithraism, some eastern mystery cults, and some local Celtic deities.

4. Next written evidence comes from the Synod of Arles, 314 AD, convoked by Constantine to treat the Donatist question. The documentation shows that three British bishops attended it (Eborius, of York (!), Restitutus of London, and Adelphius, possible of Caerleon or Lincoln or Colchester), as well as a presbyter called "Sacerdos" and a deacon called Arminius (Haddan & Stubbs 1.7). Nothing more is known of any of these persons, but their mention does suggest that there was some sort of rudimentary diocesan organization by that time.

5. No British Bishops are known to have attended the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325, but St. Athanasius lists Britain among those provinces of the church that accepted its decrees.

6. Eusebius, in his Demonstration of the Gospel (iii,3 or 5 MPG 22.203), early 4th century, says that "some apostles passed over the ocean to what are called the British Isles."

7. Some British Bishops attended the Council of Sardica, 343, and supported that council's aquittance of St. Athanasius.

8. Some British Bishops attended the Council of Rimini (Ariminum), 359, three of whom are said to have been so poor that they were forced to accept the emperor's offer to pay their expenses for travel! (Haddan & Stubbs I,9).

9. There are many other references to Christianity in Britain after the mid-fourth century; cf. Lewis, Glastonbury, 129ff.

3. WHO? EARLIEST NAME KNOWN

The first Christian in Britain whose name we know is St. Alban, layman, possibly of military background, who in the Roman city of Verulamium (modern St. Alban's) gave shelter to a Christian priest (whom later tradition has called St. Amphibalus) fleeing from persecution. Alban was converted by the priest while giving him shelter, and he gave himself up, dressed in the cloak of the priest, and was martyred instead of the priest, on the hill where the abbey (cathedral) church of St. Alban now stands (see picture, later). The evidence in Bede (I.7, pp. 44-7) dates this to 22 June, c. 303-304, and 22 June "c. 304" is The date chosen by The BCP. However, in 1968, John Morris has presented highly compelling evidence to move this date back to 22 June 209, under the persecution of Septimius Severus, and to this we now turn: Morris bases his conclusions upon earlier MSS. now available, especially one from Turin c. 8th or 9th century, which is copied from an original c. 500 not known to Bede. The Turin MS. reads: "Alban received a fugitive cleric and put on his garment and his cloak (habitu et caracalla) that he was wearing and delivered himself up to be killed instead of the priest.... and was delivered immediately to the evil Caesar Severus." Now it happens that Caracalla was the nickname of the Emperor Severus's son and co-ruler Antoninus, called "Caracalla" because of the great cloak (= "caracalla") that he wore, and Morris holds it likely that an earlier version of the Turin MS. carried a marginal note "et Caracalla" beside the line with the name of Severus (thus intended to indicate that he was delivered up to both Severus and Caracalla), and that the Turin copyist, knowing that "caracalla" was the name for a cloak but not that it was the nickname of the co-ruler Antoninus, inserted it into the wrong place in the text, assuming that it was intended to supplement the garment ("habitu") that Alban had put on! Later still, when the word "caracalla" in Latin became obsolete for "cloak" and was superseded by the word "amphibalon," "caracalla" in the text was replaced by "amphibalon," and readers then began to interpret it as meaning a person, the name of the priest, rather than a supplementary description of the garment! This is the interpretation we find with the chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth in The 12th century. Later in the same century, then, Amphibalus was supplied with a fascinating biography of his own, including martyrdom, and his own bodily remains were "discovered" in 1177! Soon his relics, too, had their own shrine, which can be seen today near that of St. Alban.

The earliest authentic known martyr in Britain remains, through, St. Alban, and the date of 209 would put him very early in the list of post-NT martyrs, following SS Peter and Paul (64), Ignatius of Antioch (c. 107), Polycarp of Smyrna (155), Justin Martyr (c. 165), The martyrs of Lyons (177), Irenaeus (c. 200-2?), Leonidas (202), Perpetua and Felicity (203), and others whose names are unknown or less well known.

However, although the date of c. 209 for St. Alban has been accepted by John Morris, Arthus Swinson, David Edwards, recent archbishops of Canterbury, and others, the period of c. 251-259 (during

the course of persecutions next earlier than 303/4) is now preferred by Charles Thomas and W.H.C. Frend, who are authorities of considerable weight, on grounds that such a single localized British martyrdom in 209 would be too isolated an event.

4. WHERE? EARLIEST PHYSICAL TRACES

A. CHI RHO PAVEMENTS:

1. Hinton St. Mary, Dorset, is the most outstanding: Discovered in 1963 and now in the British Museum (see picture, later). This is the mosaic floor of a villa, 28 by 19 feet, depicting the bust of a beardless youth, with pomegranates (symbol of immortality) on either side and the Chi Rho monogram behind his head. Date is 4th century. This is almost certainly the earliest known representation of Jesus Christ in Britain. Some, however, have claimed that this is not Christ but Constantine, for the following reasons: a) The Chi Rho was originally a pagan good luck symbol having nothing to do with Christianity. b) The Chi Rho was used by Constantine for several years after his vision and victory in 312 in an ambiguous way alongside of various pagan symbols, and even when displayed together with himself (often the case) we are not certain that it indicated that he had converted to Christianity. c) Christians' reverence for Christ was such that they would be unlikely to place his very image in the floor where it could be stepped upon. d) Constantine himself is known to have constructed a picture of himself and his sons with the Chi Rho behind their heads, on the front of his imperial palace at Constantinople. Contrary, the reasons (advanced principally by J.M.C. Toynbee and in my opinion more convincing) for concluding that the image in this mosaic pavement is in fact Jesus Christ are the following: a) The Chi Rho, although pagan in origin, soon after Constantine's victory in 312 came to assume a prominence in Christian art, and indeed an association with the head of Christ, such as we see in this mosaic. b) The figure in this mosaic neither wears nor bears any imperial dress or insignia, such as we might expect if it were Constantine or some other emperor. c) An imperial decree in 427 forbade representation of the "signum Christi" (= "The sign of Christ" = probably a collective term for the cross, Chi Rho, facial image, etc.) in floor pavements, thus indicating that before this time it was being done in some places. And the Hinton St. Mary mosaic is dated to the 4th century. d) The Chi Rho is also found in several other places behind the head of Christ, and we do not know what the image (of Constantine with Chi Rho) looked like because nothing of it has survived.

2. Other Chi Rho pavements have been found at Frampton, Dorset, at Chedworth, Glos. (on slabs around a well or fountain), and at Caerwent, on the mouth of the Severn. In addition, at Richborough, Kent, has been found a thin bronze medallion with Chi Rho and the bust of (probably) the Christian Emperor Magnentius (350-3).

3. The Chi Rho monograms from Hinton, Frampton and from the house church at Lullingstone (below) all display, in addition to the Chi Rho,

representations of Bellerophon slaying The Chimera: Bellerophon, a hero from Greek mythology, rides atop The winged horse Pegasus and slays the Chimera, which is a female monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon, vomiting forth flames of fire. Why this? -- especially in such close proximity to Christian imagery? (cf. picture from Hinton). Possibly syncretism, possibly caution, or: In Greek pagan mythology this story was an allegory of the victory of life and virtue over death and evil, of truth over falsehood, and thus apparently what we have here is an important pagan allegory of typological Christianisation: Bellerophon and the Chimera are a precursor, a type, of Christ's victory over evil and sin, and thus even the great events of the pagan world can be seen as really a preparation for the Christian Gospel. At Hinton and Frampton, the same mosaicist and the same architect may have worked to produce, in each case, a continuous floor for two inter-connecting rooms divided by a wide opening.

B. OTHER EARLY NOTEWORTHY PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

1) The Pater Noster Word-Square or Cryptogram. 2nd or 3rd century, on wall plaster from a Roman house at Cirencester (Glos.), found in 1868. Cf. picture below. The sentence/palindrome (reads the same backwards and forwards) has no clear meaning: ROTAS OPERA TENET AREPO SATOR. The most literal translation = "The sower Arepo holds the wheels carefully." Another possible translation (Michael Green) is "The God who sows The seed (of the Gospel) holds the spheres (of the universe) with care" with AREPO standing for Alpha Rex Et Pater Omega. Since 1926 the generally accepted interpretation is that this is an anagram (phrase made from another by rearranging its letters), in which all the letters of the square can be used to write PATER NOSTER twice, in the form of a cross, with a single N at the intersection and with two each unused A's and O's (= alpha and omega, symbol of Christ in Rev 1:8) at the extremities (cf. picture). Hence, a cryptic Christian symbol, dating from a period of persecution before the Christian faith could be openly professed in safety. Another English example of it, on a sherd from an amphora, was discovered at Manchester, England in 1978. Two other such squares have been discovered in a home and on a column in the sports arena at Pompeii in 1925 and 1936, and others near Budapest, in France, Ethiopia, Nubia, South America, Alexandria, at Dura on the Euphrates (4 times, dating before 256 AD), and in an 11th century British manuscript (CCCC.41.). It has been suggested that this symbol may go back to the persecution of Nero in 64 AD, although it is unlikely that the Cirencester cryptogram is this ancient. Hopkins and Kraeling even doubt that it is Christian, while Hassall and Tomlin believe it was adopted by Christians before the 4th century but is not of Christian origin.

2) The Icklingham (Suffolk) Lead Tank. Two feet eight inches in diameter and 13 inches deep, displays on its outside the Chi Rho flanked by Alpha and Omega. Probably 4th century, probably used for Baptisms, and if so it is probably the earliest surviving Christian Baptismal font in Britain. A total of six tanks of this sort have thus far been found in Britain from the Roman period, four of them showing the Chi Rho (two at Icklingham), and it seems probable that these were portable fonts for

Baptism by affusion. Cf. picture below.

3) The Walesby (Lincs.) Lead Tank. Only one side of this survives, displaying the Chi Rho and a figure scene. Entire, the size would be about 3 feet by 20 inches. The frieze (cf. pictures below) appears to show the interior of a stationary baptistry in flattened perspective, with an undressed female candidate in the center about to step forward into a font, assisted by two other women (? deacons), with two groups of male members of the congregation in support on either side, all seen from the viewpoint of an (undepicted) officiating cleric. This is the earliest pictorial representation of Baptism in England.

4) The Water Newton Silver Treasure. Discovered 1975 near Peterborough. Dating from the early 4th century, or at least c. 350, this is the earliest known collection of Christian silver from the Roman empire. It may well have been used by a British Christian community for cultic purposes, possibly the Eucharist, and was hidden for protection. Consists of a large silver dish, a silver strainer, gold disc, inscribed bowl or cup, and several silver votive plaques all with Chi Rho and several with Alpha and Omega that seem to have been affixed to The interior of a church building or shrine and then later removed in haste. These are the earliest such votive plaques to be found bearing Christian inscriptions. Cf. pictures below. The Latin inscription on the bowl or cup may be related to a variant text of the Eucharist: "I Publianus, relying on you, Lord, honor your holy sanctuary" (altare). Of the Water Newton votive plaques, John Chandler has remarked, "The very existence of these objects suggests a notion of Christianity current in Britain which would have horrified the church leaders on the continent. But would their horror have been greater than that inspired by a picture of Christ's head on a mosaic floor?" Also dating from the 4th century, probably the 360's, is The Mildenhall Treasure of silver in the British Museum, mostly pagan but three spoons bearing the Chi Rho, which may have been the property of a Christian general in the Roman army in Britain named Lupicinus.

5) Shepton Mallet Cross. The earliest English Christian cross, dated to the late 4th century, discovered 1990 in Somerset. The only permitted replica is worn by Abp. Carey of Canterbury. Picture below.

6) Earliest church buildings were of three kinds: 1) Intramural congregational churches, such as Silchester (below); 2) Extramural cemetery churches, such as St. Albans and the earliest church at Canterbury (St. Martin or St. Pancras, below); and 3) Oratories on private estates, such as Lullingstone (below), or (above) Frampton and Hinton.

C) EARLIEST KNOWN HOUSE-CHURCH

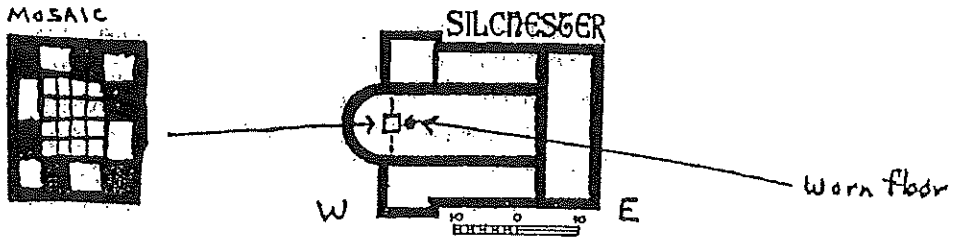
LULLINGSTONE, Kent (some 20 miles from London, near Eynsford). Excavations from 1949 onwards have uncovered a house built probably before 345 AD, of which two rooms in the NW corner were being used for Christian worship by about 350, their walls being decorated with Chi Rho

monograms and orantes (figures at prayer). Cf. pictures below. There also may have been a hall for catechumens, a vestibule, and a sacristy. Some time in the later 4th century (c. 370), it appears that these two major rooms were blocked off from the rest of the house and a new door probably opened up to lead directly outside, which may indicate transition from domestic oratory to a place of public worship. Floor mosaics depict Bellerophon slaying the Chimera (as at Hinton and Frampton, above) and the abduction of Europa by Jupiter. At Lullingstone there has also been found a 2nd century circular temple, possibly to some Celtic river deity, evidence of ritual fires, as well as a late Saxon church, all evidence of the continuity of worship at this place.

D) EARLIEST KNOWN CHURCH BUILDING

SILCHESTER, Hants: Small basilican church discovered in 1892, 45 feet long by 33 feet wide, wall paintings indicating Chi Rho and Alpha and Omega. Date 4th century but probably not before 360. Remains of what was probably a contemporary baptistery are just six feet outside the east end: a rectangular platform of flint blocks 11 feet by 14 feet, with a 4-foot square base of large tiles in the center and near it a small drain pit. The church itself is of basilican design: semi-circular apse at western (NB) end and two short side aisles 5 feet wide ending in slightly wider but enclosed chambers or short transepts at the western end (suggestive of Orthodox prothesis and diakonikon); narthex is at eastern end. Further see diagram below.

On the chord of the apse in the western end there is a small mosaic pavement about 4 feet square, consisting of an inner square of black and white checker pattern surrounded by a border of larger black and white squares and then by an outer black border. This mosaic is quite unworn, which has suggested to scholars that something usually stood over it, probably a moveable wooden altar. The floor just to the east of this mosaic is quite worn, which has suggested either that the priest celebrated the Eucharist facing west with his back to the worshipers (Moorman, p. 5), or (more probably, in my opinion) that communion was administered from a station in front of the altar, the worn spot coming from the many shuffling feet of the communicants rather than from the two stationary feet of the priest who more likely stood on the other side. Diagram below:



Note that the Silchester basilica is very similar in structure to a mithraeum discovered in the same village, and indeed many more remains of pagan places of worship survive from the Roman period in Britain than do Christian churches. This is understandable because down to the victory of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge in 312 all official worship

was pagan and very few public places of Christian worship were built. The most notable pagan remain is a mithraic temple which stood on the Walbrook (stream) in London, between modern Cannon St. station and the Bank of England; it continued in use at least into the 4th century, possibly after Constantine, and was excavated in 1954 after the site had been bombed in 1940. It can be seen today, and its contents are kept in the new Museum of London. Still three other mithraea, in the north at Carrawburgh, Housesteads, and Rudchester, appear to have been destroyed in a wave of Christian enthusiasm in the early 4th century. There was also a pagan temple at Lydney on the Bristol Channel newly constructed during the reign of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate 361-3 AD, and there is a column surviving in Cirencester (Glos.) which the governor of that part of Roman Britain had re-erected to Jupiter during Julian's reign.

F) EARLIEST PLACE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP CONTINUING TODAY

CANTERBURY: CHURCH OF ST. MARTIN or CHURCH OF ST. PANCRAS. The foundations, west wall, and lower parts of the church of St. Martin have long been considered of Roman origin, dating from the 4th century. Located outside the Roman walls of the city itself, to the east of the cathedral. (See pictures below). Bede (1.26) tells us it was "built in honor of St. Martin during the Roman occupation of Britain." The lower portion of its 11th century font also seems to incorporate portions of an earlier, 4th century font that may have been the one used by St. Augustine for the baptism of King Ethelbert of Kent probably in 601 AD.

But is this church of St. Martin really the one of Roman origin which, according to Bede, was apparently used by Queen Bertha of Kent probably in the later 6th century and rebuilt then by her Frankish chaplain Bishop Liudhard, and also probably used by St. Augustine of Canterbury after his mission of 596-7? Charles Thomas, whose authority is considerable, believes (1981) that somehow Bede has got the evidence wrong and that the church they used is more likely to be that of St. Pancras, also to the east of the city but nearer to the cathedral and now in considerable ruin. JRW: The traditional claim of the church of St. Martin has not been displaced, but has been weakened.

5. THE EARLIEST ENGLISH/ANGLICAN HERETIC: PELAGIUS

British monk and theologian who taught in Rome in the early 5th century. In attempting to defend Christian asceticism by emphasizing human freedom to choose the good, Pelagius soon began to teach that human beings themselves can even take the initial and fundamental steps towards their own salvation apart from God's grace, and in so doing he seemed to deny the existence of original sin. Pelagianism was condemned by various popes and regional councils throughout the 5th century. It has been called the essentially British, or typically Anglican, heresy.

6. THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

In the year 410, as Rome was sacked and fell to the Goths under

Alaric the Visigoth, the Emperor Honorius wrote the cities of Britain that they must henceforth look out for themselves and assume responsibility for their own defense without the aid of the Roman legions. The fifth century saw both the symbolic and the actual end of the Pax Romana, and at the same time successive invasions of England by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes that were to continue for some time: The Angles predominantly northwards from East Anglia, Saxons mainly south of them, and Jutes in Kent. Indeed, it was from the Angles that the names "England" (Angle-land) and "Anglican" were eventually to come.

One hero of The Romano-British resistance to these Saxon invasions, perhaps real perhaps legendary, but about whom there is no actual historical evidence at all, was a King named Arthur. To him later writers (Gildas in the 6th century, Nennius in the 8th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes and Wace and Layamon in the 12th century, Sir Thomas Mallory in the 15th century, and numerous other authors of poetry and epic prose, little known or unknown) attributed a series of legends including Arthur's temporary victory under the cross of Christ against the Saxons at Badon Hill (location uncertain) around the year 500 AD, as well as other stories about his knights and court at Camelot, the feasts at the round table of equality, his counselor and magician Merlin, his enemies Mordred and Guinevere, and other related stories of Perceval (Parzival) and the Holy Grail, Gawain and the Green Knight, the tragic love affair of Tristan and Iseult, and the supposed burial of Arthur and Guinevere at Glastonbury (part of the Glastonbury Legends that arose in the 12th century). In the 14th century King Edward III would model his Order of the Garter upon this legend, as he and his knights feasted on a round table at Windsor. The total legacy of these Arthurian legends has survived over the centuries to provide a vision, whether true or not, of an early Christian empire in Britain ruled by a "once and future king" (Tennyson) who would return and re-establish it.

Arthurian legends about the demise of Roman Britain notwithstanding, Charles Thomas has shown convincingly (1981) that when the Saxons and others began their invasions of the East of England in the fifth century, the Romano-British population and church as well as Latin language all continued to survive even in the SE as well as concentrating strength in the SW and North. [Indeed, it was in the early fifth century that the Romano-British Bishop Ninian would go to build a stone church of dressed ashlar (called "Candida Casa", or white house, by Bede in HE 3.4) at his see of Whithorn, from which he would go to evangelize the southern Picts in the lowlands of SW Scotland]. For the recent historian Charles Thomas, and he is probably right, the true dividing line between Romano-British and medieval Anglo-Saxon Christianity must come not in 410 but about 475-500, with the advent of classical monasticism in Britain, perhaps first at Tintagel on the SW coast (and not earlier with Victricius, Ninian, Patrick, or Gildas). By this time, of course, Celtic Christianity was already under way; see separate Celtic notes. Iona (under Columba) would follow in the sixth century (563) and Lindisfarne (under Aidan and Cuthbert) in the seventh century (634). And c. 597, St. Augustine of Canterbury arrived from Rome, sent by Pope Gregory I.