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The British Church and the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms to c.620 (Chapter Four of The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church)

Caitlin Corning

George Fox University, ccorning@georgefox.edu

Chapter 4

The British Church and the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms to c.620

At the same time that Columbanus was establishing his monasteries in Merovingian Gaul, Pope Gregory the Great began planning a mission to convert the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms located in present-day England. The pope wrote to leading Merovingians such as Brunhild asking for their support in this endeavor and to provide whatever aid was necessary for the missionaries. In 596, Augustine (597–604/10), future bishop of Canterbury, and his party departed Italy for the north, traveling through the Merovingian kingdoms to Kent where the papal mission established their headquarters at the old Roman town of Canterbury (map 4.1).[1]

In the first years of the seventh century, Augustine came into conflict with the British Church over their alternative practices, specifically baptism and the Celtic-84. Augustine also wanted the British bishops to submit to his authority and to assist in converting the Anglo-Saxons. However, the British churchmen refused to acknowledge Augustine's jurisdiction or change their practices.

The Post-Roman British Church

It is important to remember that the British Church did not disappear with the withdrawal of Roman troops in the early part of the fifth century.[2] Recent studies, in fact, have stressed the continued flourishing of this tradition during the post–Roman period, especially in areas not under Anglo-Saxon domination. Along with St. Patrick, scholars point to the
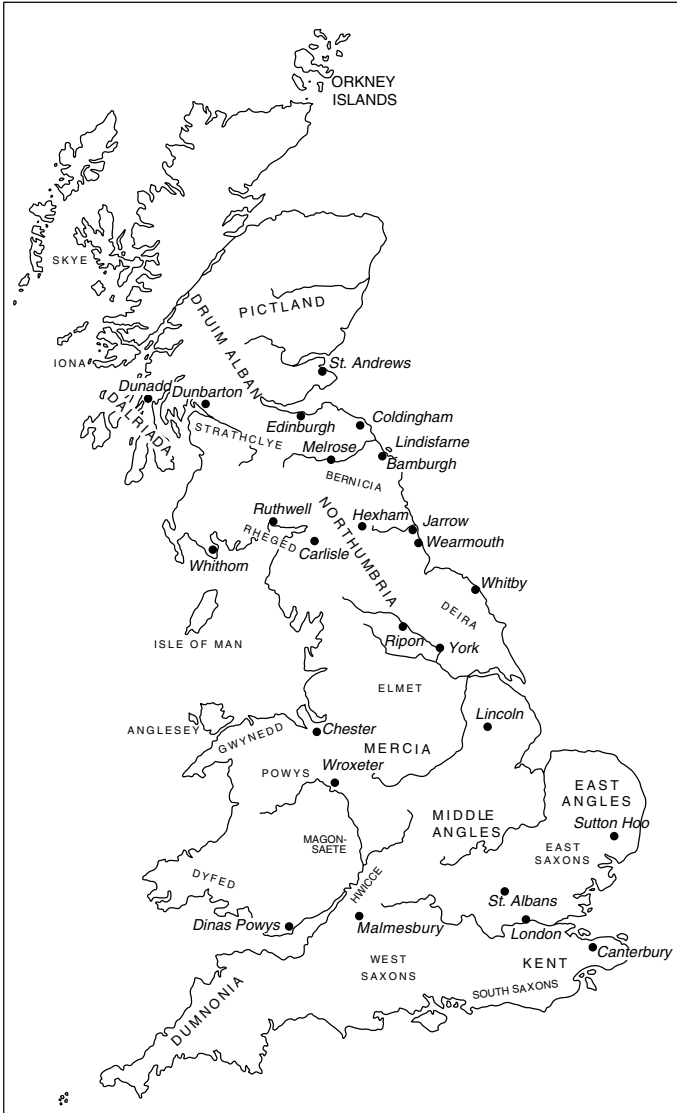
Map 4.1 Britain

possibility of other British clergy traveling to Ireland to assist with conversion and provide pastoral care.[3] In fact, parts of the Irish Church may have remained under some level of British authority through the late fifth century.[4] Even after this, loan words and other linguistic evidence demonstrate continued British influence on the Irish Church at least until the seventh century.[5]

Documentary evidence from the fifth and sixth centuries also depicts a functioning Christian community. In c.475, Constantius of Lyons wrote the *Life of St. Germanus of Auxerre* in which he discusses a controversy over the Pelagian heresy in Britain in c.429.[6] Constantius portrays the saint interacting with Romano-British Christians, not pagans.[7] Gildas' *On the Ruin of Britain*, composed before the middle of the sixth century, is a condemnation of the worldliness and sins of British secular and ecclesiastical leadership.[8] His work, like Patrick's, points to a Christian community whose elite were educated in Latin, the Christian Scriptures, grammar, and rhetoric.[9]

Archaeological evidence as well upholds the theory that Christian communities remained in some areas of sub-Roman Britain. Cemeteries and inscribed stones help to document a Christian presence.[10] Place-name evidence and topography also can lend clues regarding the survival of British communities in territories that would eventually come under Anglo-Saxon control in the seventh century.[11]

As discussed previously, the invention of penitentials most likely occurred within the British Church in the sixth century. The earliest penitential appears to have been written in the sixth century by Gildas or at least it is attributed to him.[12] Finnian, who wrote a penitential that Columbanus later used in composing his own, may have resided in Ireland, but is considered British by some scholars.[13] Although only preserved in later manuscripts, the *Synod of North Britain* and the *Synod of the Grove of Victory* may be examples of British sixth-century penitential documents as well.[14]

However, the above evidence primarily applies to the western and northern parts of Britain. For Britons in the southeast, the situation was quite different.[15] This area saw the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlement and the replacement of Romano-British culture with a Germanic overlay. Evidence for Christian survival in these areas rests primarily on place-name evidence and the survival of martyr cults. Even within the Anglo-Saxon heartlands of the East where Anglo-Saxon settlement was the heaviest in the sixth century, a few place names retained the *Eccles* element, which seems to have been derived from the Latin, *ecclesia* or "church."[16] These may demonstrate local, functioning British Christian communities for some time after the Anglo-Saxon domination of these areas.

There also are spotty reports of the continuation of martyr cults.[17] The cult of Alban, a possible third-century martyr, appears to have functioned

continuously until taken over by Anglo-Saxons in the early seventh century.[18] Gildas also mentions the names of a few Christian martyrs in Britain and the fact that it was no longer possible to access their shrines due to Anglo-Saxon occupation.[19] The *Libellus Responsionum*, written by Pope Gregory the Great to Augustine in c.601, mentions the existence of a cult center for a martyr named Sixtus, though the community had no details of his martyrdom.[20] It is unknown how many other cult centers or memorials may have continued to function for which there is no surviving documentation.

Therefore, it is important to envision differences in the continuation of Romano-British Christianity. Scholars disagree with regard to how defuse and numerous the Christian community was in Britain c.400, but between 400 and 600 the Church in areas outside Anglo-Saxon control not only continued to function but provided missionaries for Ireland, founded religious communities, offered an impressive education for some, and was influential in the development of penitentials. It is also clear that the British Church was not isolated, but remained in contact with Merovingian Gaul.

In areas where the Anglo-Saxons first gained dominance, namely in the southeast, pastoral care was greatly impoverished.[21] Isolated communities possibly focused on cult centers continued, but were cut off from Christians further west.[22] In these kingdoms, as the British population was comprised of peasants or possibly slaves, they did not greatly influence the surrounding Anglo-Saxon society.

Sources for the Augustinian Mission

There are a small number of applicable primary sources that help historians reconstruct the interaction between the British Church and the papal mission.[23] A few surviving papal letters provide context, but the main source is the *Ecclesiastical History* written by Bede, a Northumbrian monk, in c.731. Obviously, Bede composed his *History* over a hundred years after the events, but it is still crucial for analyzing this period.

Bede—Some Background

Most of what we know about Bede comes from his own works. At the end of his *History*, he provides a short autobiographical note and a list of the works he had written to that date.[24] Bede was born in the early 670s on lands controlled by the monastery of Wearmouth and at age seven was given to the care of Abbot Benedict Biscop (674–89). With the establishment of

Jarrow, Wearmouth's sister foundation in 681, he transferred to this monastery under the leadership of Abbot Ceolfrid (688–716). As an adult, he taught and wrote about the Scriptures and Church fathers, composing biblical commentaries, books on computistics, saints' Lives, martyrologies, hymns, poetry, and literary studies. He died at Jarrow in 735 (map 4.1).

The History—*General Analysis*

It is important to remember that for the early events in the history of the Anglo-Saxon Church, Bede's *History* is a secondary text.[25] He had to rely on the sources available and construct a narrative that fit his didactic purposes. Bede mentions that Albinus, abbot of Sts. Peter and Paul, Canterbury provided both written documents and oral testimony about the Gregorian mission and the conversion of Kent. In addition, Nothelm, future archbishop of Canterbury (735–39), delivered the documents from Albinus to Jarrow and traveled to Rome to copy letters from the papal archives. Thus, it is probable that Bede's account of the mission reflects, at least in part, Canterbury's view of events.

In the introduction to the *History*, Bede states his belief that history is written for a moral purpose.[26] Due to this vision for his work, historians have recognized that throughout the *History*, the reader is presented with models to imitate or to avoid: the good bishop, the bad bishop, the good king, the bad king, the good monk, the bad priest, and so on.[27] Since Bede viewed it as his responsibility to produce a work of history that would edify his readers, he would not present someone as evil and yet prospering throughout his/her life, without the eventuality of divine punishment. This is not to imply that all the information in the *History* should be viewed as false. However, Bede constructed his material to emphasize certain viewpoints.

In the Middle Ages, the historian's job was to teach through example and to show God working through history.[28] Where a modern historian might look to social or economic causes, Bede would have seen the hand of God. In the *History*, he wanted to tell the story of the trials and eventual triumph of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, to encourage the Christians of his day and to motivate the Church to reform.[29]

The complexities between the interaction of Bede's agenda and his source material can be seen in Bede's presentation of the papal mission. His narrative emphasizes the role of the pope in sponsoring the mission, but is basically silent about the aid received from the Merovingian courts. It is only by using other sources that it is possible to reconstruct the high level of Frankish assistance.[30] Bede may have decided not to focus on the Merovingians in order to highlight the relationship between the papacy and the English Church, something that was important in Bede's own time.

On the other hand, this silence could reflect the lack of information in his sources. For instance, when Nothelm traveled to Rome to obtain documents for Bede, he may have decided not to copy most of the letters from Pope Gregory to the secular and ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Merovingian kingdoms. It is impossible to know how much Bede was creating a story to fit his goals and where he was limited by his sources.

Bede and the Easter Controversy

By the time Bede began writing the *History*, he had already finished his work *The Reckoning of Time*.[31] This book examined all aspects of the calendar including how to calculate the date of Easter. While all those involved in the Easter controversy would have comprehended the basic issues, Bede understood the more complex calculations and arguments. As an expert in the field, he did not tolerate those who refused to see the errors of the Celtic-84 and Victorian tables.

Besides his professional interest in the topic, Bede was also concerned about the influence of the Easter controversy on Church unity. As with Columbanus and others before him, Bede well understood the harm that division could bring to the Church and its mission if it divided into competing groups. One of the major themes of the *History* is the progress toward unity in Easter calculation among the churches of the British Isles. By the time Bede finished the *History* in 731, all of the Insular Church except parts of the British had adopted the Roman tonsure and Dionysian table. Bede had only disdain for the British Church and its inability to admit it was wrong in the face of the unified body of Christ. His frustration colored and influenced the narratives that discuss this tradition in his *History*.

Augustine and the British Ecclesiastics according to Bede

In the *History*, Bede provides information about two meetings between Augustine and members of the British Church.[32] The overall narrative can be divided into four major scenes. In the first, Augustine, with the help of King Æthelberht of Kent, summoned British churchmen from the neighboring kingdom to meet at a place Bede identifies as "Augustine's Oak." This was probably on the border between the kingdoms of Hwicce and the West Saxons (see map 4.1). Once there, Augustine requested that the British keep the "Catholic peace," help to convert the Anglo-Saxons, and abandon their alternative Easter dating.[33] After much debate, the two sides could not reach agreement.

Augustine then suggested that they could determine which tradition God preferred by trying to heal a sick man. The group that was successful would be the one God favored. The British ecclesiastics were unable to heal the man, but Augustine succeeded. In the face of such a miracle, the British agreed that Augustine must be right, but stated that they could not adopt new practices without their people's consent. Both sides agreed to meet again.

Later, in scene two, seven British bishops and a number of scholars, chiefly from the monastery of Bangor-is-Coed, ask a hermit what they should do. The hermit replied that if Augustine was a true man of God and humbly stood when they arrived, they should follow his advice. Next, the two sides again met. With the arrival of the British delegation, Augustine remained seated, thus proving his prideful nature. Angered at this, the British "strove to contradict everything he said."[34] Augustine eventually made three demands: that they abandon their alternative method for calculating the date of Easter, that they "complete" the baptism ritual according to the Roman rite, and that they help to convert the Anglo-Saxons. The British refused and also rejected Augustine's claim that the papacy had given him authority over the British Church. Augustine therefore condemned them saying that they would face death at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons.

In the last scene, Bede reports the fulfillment of Augustine's prophecy.[35] In c.615, the pagan king of Northumbria, Æthelfrith (592–616), attacked the British. At the battle, Æthelfrith and his men killed 1,200 priests from the monastery of Bangor who had come to pray for a British victory. Bede's linking of the meeting with Augustine and the later battle demonstrates to his readers that, just as in the Old Testament, God still raised up pagan kings to punish his disobedient people.[36]

The British Church—A Heretical Tradition

This series of stories is the turning point in Bede's presentation of the British. Before discussing the arrival of Augustine, the *History* does not portray the British in an entirely negative light. Using Gildas' *On the Ruin of Britain*, Bede presents the Anglo-Saxon invasion as a punishment from God for British sins.[37] However, he also relates that when they repented and trusted in God, they were able to defeat their enemies. Unfortunately, just as with the ancient Israelites, victory led to luxury and internal strife. The British would once again turn away from God and in response they experienced plague and new defeats.[38] Therefore, Bede paints the British in a cycle of sin, punishment, and repentance.

Bede also includes information from *Life of St. Germanus* to discuss the Pelagian heresy in Britain.[39] According to Bede, the British asked for help from the Gallic Church who sent St. Germanus, bishop of Auxerre, in

c.429.[40] Through preaching and teaching, he was able to turn the people back to the truth. Interestingly, Bede includes the story of the failure of the Pelagians to heal a blind girl.[41] St. Germanus, on the other hand, was successful thereby convincing all that he truly represented God. In the presence of such a miracle, the people fully abandoned false teachings. Bede's readers surely would have seen the parallel to the Augustinian narrative.

Therefore, in the first part of the *History*, Bede's presentation of the Britons is mixed. On the one hand, he portrays the invasion of Britain by the Saxons as a punishment from God for a multitude of sins. On the other, he includes stories of early martyrs, presents the British as defeating the Anglo-Saxons when they relied on God, humbly asking for assistance to combat the Pelagian heresy, and wanting to remain true to the orthodox faith.

Once the British ecclesiastical leaders rejected Augustine's call to unity in Church practices and a joint mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons, Bede's depiction of this tradition is entirely negative. The British Church is only mentioned in passing from this point in the *History* always with the reminder that it used heretical practices.[42] For Bede, it was possible that before the arrival of Augustine the British were unaware of their error. However, after meeting with Augustine and even, at least according to the *History*, admitting he was right, Bede had no sympathy for them. The set narratives discussing the British response to Germanus healing a blind girl and Augustine healing a blind man form an interesting indictment.[43] While in the past the British had been able to see the errors of their ways, this was no longer the case. Bede uses the British loss of territory and influence as examples of what happens to a tradition that rejects the truth.

Summary

Therefore, while Bede's *History* is an invaluable resource for the early medieval Church, it must be used carefully when analyzing Celtic–Roman interactions. Bede finished his book in c.731, over a hundred and thirty years after the arrival of Augustine's mission. This meant that he had to rely on surviving documents and oral traditions. In many ways, for the early narratives, the *History* is more a secondary than primary source.

In addition, in the *History*, the meeting between Augustine and the British plays a crucial role in Bede's construction of the British as a heretical branch of the Church. While in the past, they had repented, in this case they rejected Augustine's admonitions to adopt the Roman rite of baptism and the Victorian table. In addition, Bede believed that they refused to assist in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Since the British knowingly discarded the truth and rejected Christ's command to spread the Gospel,

they were punished by God and marginalized within the *History*. Thus even with his limited sources, Bede may have omitted any positive information he had on this branch and minimized its role within Anglo-Saxon England in order to ensure that his model of the disobedient people was not damaged.

The Issues of Controversy

Easter

Although Bede is careful not to identify which table Augustine used, all evidence points to the fact that he would have advocated the Victorian table since Rome did not adopt the Dionysian until sometime in the 630s.[44] If Columbanus' comments condemning the Victorian table can be used as evidence for the general attitude in the Irish and British Churches, it is not too surprising that the British ecclesiastics were unwilling to adopt a table they saw as poorly calculated.

As can be seen in table 2.2, each table was listing dates that were controversial to the supporters of the other table. According to the Victorian table, the Celtic-84 was listing dates as early as *luna* 12. For those referencing the Celtic-84, the Victorian table advocated Easter dates as late as *luna* 24. An additional problem occurred in 604, when the Victorian table listed March 22 as the correct Easter, three days before the Celtic-84 equinox of March 25. Therefore, both tables were listing "dark" Easters and symbolically denying the need for Christ's grace.

Along with the theological problems, there were practical ones as well. Augustine wanted the British Church to assist with the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Unity in Easter dating and fourteen weeks of the liturgical calendar would have been important to ensure that the newly established Anglo-Saxon Churches were not immersed in controversy. From the point of view of those using the Celtic-84 table, adopting the Victorian table that had listed two Easter dates in the past and would do so again was not a good solution to the problem. For Augustine and his supporters, abandoning the table used at Rome for one followed by only a handful of regions was clearly out of the question.

Baptism

One of the more perplexing aspects of Bede's presentation of the confrontation between Augustine and the British bishops is the report that Augustine

wanted the British to "complete" the baptism rite according to Roman and apostolic practice.[45] Unfortunately, Bede seems not to have known what was wrong with the British liturgy because he provides no details in the *History*. Since such information would have strengthened his case against the British, his silence is telling. Any analysis of Bede's story is complicated by the fact that there are no surviving descriptions of the British rite of baptism in this period.

Some historians point to the possibility that episcopal confirmation of the baptismal candidate may not have been included in the British version of the ceremony.[46] As far as can be reconstructed, in the rite used at Rome the initiate was anointed twice. The first could be performed by a priest, but the second unction and laying on of hands through which the candidate received the Holy Spirit could only be administered by a bishop.[47] If the British Church did not include the second anointing, Augustine might have argued that those baptized within this tradition had not received the Holy Spirit, leaving the ceremony incomplete.

All this is complicated by the fact that there are no other reported instances of conflict over the British rite. Certainly if it was missing a crucial element such as the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, it can be assumed that additional disputes would have arisen. This is especially true if the British and Irish used the same liturgy since the Irish were instrumental in the conversion of parts of Anglo-Saxon England.

One possible explanation for the absence of controversy is that the liturgy in question was used by only a small portion of the British Church and then abandoned soon after the meeting with Augustine. The problem with this theory is that, at least when it came to Easter, the Welsh were not in favor of the adoption of Roman practices. Therefore, it appears somewhat out of character for them to have quickly adopted a new liturgy.

Another possibility is that there was nothing seriously wrong with the British rite and it was simply the circumstances of the Gregorian mission that caused Augustine to demand that the British use the Roman liturgy. Augustine may have been concerned that it would confuse the newly founded Anglo-Saxon Christian communities to practice two different forms of baptism. It is easy to imagine questions arising over whether the initiate had received the Holy Spirit if some were anointed only once and others underwent a second anointing with laying on of hands by a bishop.

In the *Libellus Responsionum*, Pope Gregory encouraged Augustine to adopt a combination of practices from Rome and Gaul that would fit the new Anglo-Saxon Church.[48] Historians have highlighted the fact that Gregory was very open to liturgical diversity. For instance, he approved of the Visigothic Church immersing the candidate once during baptism, even though in Rome it was done three times.[49] However, it should be assumed

that neither the pope nor Augustine would have advocated a variation of central practices, such as the rite of baptism, within the English Church itself. The church at Canterbury could have a liturgy that differed from that at Rome, but it should use a rite which was similar to all the other churches founded by the Roman missionaries. All evidence demonstrates that Canterbury's liturgy was profoundly influenced by the Roman one.[50]

The theory that there was nothing inherently wrong with the British rite is strengthened by the possibility that many areas of the Western Church did not include the episcopal anointing and laying on of hands in the baptismal liturgy.[51] For instance, parts of the Merovingian Church may have used a rite that omitted this. Reconstructions of the Gallican liturgy suggest that the officiant, be he priest or bishop, anointed the candidate once who thus received the Holy Spirit. It was only after the Carolingian reforms of the late eighth century, with the adoption of the Roman rite, that the bishop was required to complete the ceremony.[52] It has also been suggested that the oldest surviving Irish and Visigothic liturgies did not mandate episcopal participation.[53]

If these reconstructions are correct and if Augustine's disapproval with the British liturgy stemmed from the absence of any episcopal element in the ceremony, it can be assumed that Augustine would have requested that the Frankish clergy participating in the mission as well as the British use the Roman rite. If Bede's report of the meetings between Augustine and the British is correct, he was willing to allow them some leeway in following their own practices. However, diversity in Easter dating and the baptism ceremony were not acceptable.

The major critique to this hypothesis is that it does not account for the lack of a similar debate elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon Church. If the use of a single baptismal liturgy was considered crucial in mission areas, the presence of Irish, Gallic, Roman, and British ecclesiastics in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms should have triggered additional discussion. For instance, Northumbria was converted by Roman and Irish missionaries, but the only recorded disagreements centered on Easter dating and the tonsure.[54] In addition, Anglo-Saxon sources from the mid-seventh to early eighth centuries which discuss baptism usually include the need for episcopal confirmation.[55] This somewhat undermines the idea that the Gallic and Irish rites did not have an episcopal element.

It is impossible to make many definitive statements about the British baptismal liturgy because of the lack of evidence. However, the absence of continuing conflict leads to the conclusion that the British rite of baptism cannot be viewed as a Celtic distinctive that differed in some significant way from the liturgies in use on the Continent. There is not enough proof to state that the Irish and British used the same ceremony or even that all of

the British churches were united in their practice. In addition, some historians would argue that the possible reconstructions of the British liturgy are very similar to the Gallican and Irish rites, thereby including the British practice within a much wider tradition than simply the Celtic. However, even without being able to identify the specific problem with the British liturgy, it is probable that the conflict between the British churchmen and Augustine was influenced to some extent by the specific circumstances of the Gregorian mission.

Conversion Issues

Along with using the Celtic-84 Easter table, Bede's condemnation of the British Church came from his belief that they did nothing to bring Christianity to the pagan Anglo-Saxons. However, historians point to elusive evidence that the British may have been more involved than Bede believed. First, in the West Midlands, archaeology and topography suggest that British Christian communities may have been responsible for converting Anglo-Saxons in the kingdoms of Hwicce and Magonsæte (map 4.1).[56] Certainly it appears that at least portions of these kingdoms were converted in the sixth century, even before the arrival of the Gregorian mission in Kent.[57]

Another interesting piece of evidence comes from the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* or *the History of the Britons*.[58] This document, compiled c.830, states that the Northumbrian king Edwin (617–33) was baptized by Rhun, son of Urien, usually identified as the king of Rheged, a northern British kingdom (map 4.1).[59] This information is incorrect because it is known that Paulinus, bishop of Northumbria, baptized Edwin.[60] However, Rhun may have acted as Edwin's baptism sponsor, in other words, his godfather. As the same Latin word was used for both "baptizer" and "sponsor," confusion could have arisen regarding Rhun's participation in the baptism. If this statement in the *History* reflects any historical truth, it points to links between Rheged and Northumbria in this early period, even though the tradition has become distorted.[61]

While there is some evidence for the participation of the British Church in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, it was limited for a number of reasons. First, by the late Roman Empire, being a civilized Roman meant being a Christian.[62] Therefore, as the Anglo-Saxons began their takeover of Britain, part of the cultural identity of the British may have been their Christianity. In this dichotomy between civilized and uncivilized, Roman and barbarian, Christianity became a defining characteristic of the British that, like language and history, set them apart from their invaders.[63] It must also be

remembered that the Anglo-Saxons were the enemies of the Britons. That as well may have influenced their decision not to convert the pagan tribes.

Even had the Britons attempted to convert the Anglo-Saxons rulers before the arrival of missionaries from Rome or Iona, it is easy to see why they would have been unsuccessful in areas where the Anglo-Saxons were dominant. Anglo-Saxon kings respected religions that could provide success, especially military victories. Looking at the status of the Britons under Anglo-Saxon control, it does not appear that Christianity would be a very attractive religion. It seems highly unlikely that the Anglo-Saxon kings would have welcomed any religious overtures from the defeated Britons who were peasants or slaves in their kingdoms.[64] It may have been different between those in the independent British kingdoms and their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, but the legacy of conflict would have complicated this as well.

Ironically, just as the British may have found some level of cultural unity by emphasizing their Roman past, the Anglo-Saxons also sought to identify with Rome. This association could be found through Christianity, but only the Christianity of successful rulers like those in Merovingian Gaul or the old Roman heartlands. The new Anglo-Saxon Church appears to have made every effort to separate from its defeated neighbors and present itself as securely tied into the heritage of Rome.[65] Pope Gregory's letter to King Æthelberht praises him as a new Constantine.[66] In the oldest of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, it would take outsiders, representing the memories of imperial power, to persuade the Anglo-Saxon rulers to convert.[67]

Jurisdiction and Authority

Augustine wrote to Pope Gregory questioning Canterbury's relationship to the Frankish and British Churches. The pope replied that although Augustine had no authority in Gaul, the British bishops did fall under his jurisdiction.[68] Pope Gregory envisioned that the English Church would be divided between two metropolitan bishops, one at London and the other at York. Each of these bishops would have twelve bishops under their authority. Thus both of the metropolitan sees in the Church would be located in Anglo-Saxon areas. The British, therefore, were being asked to acknowledge Augustine's authority and help establish a Church whose administrative focus would be in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

In addition, Bede remarks that Augustine was able to arrange the first meeting with the British clergy through the help of King Æthelberht of Kent, one of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon monarchs at that time. His protection and support of Augustine would have certainly worried the British ecclesiastics.[69] From their point of view, they were being asked to

submit not so much to Augustine or to Rome, but to the Anglo-Saxons.[70] The British bishops may well have feared that acknowledging Augustine's religious authority would come with secular political ties to the people who had been slowly conquering their land for over a hundred and fifty years.[71]

Bede's explanation of why the British rejected Augustine rests partially on the story of the holy man and his advice to follow only a humble leader.[72] Because Augustine remained seated as the British arrived, they knew that his demands could not truly reflect the will of God. This story of authority resting in the humble leader evidences possible parallels between Columbanus and the British churchmen.[73] Columbanus believed that if both the supporters of the Victorian table and the Celtic-84 were to humbly submit to God, they would be able to determine which tradition was correct.[74] Thus it was the humble contemplative who would be able to clearly discern the truth. Since the British were faced with the decision of whether or not to acknowledge Augustine's authority and to adopt a table they saw as celebrating a dark Easter, Augustine needed to prove his legitimacy. The ability to heal a sick man was a good sign, but his pride meant that the British could not be sure he truly spoke God's will.

All this is interesting in light of a letter from Pope Gregory to Augustine preserved in Bede's *History*.[75] The pope cautions the bishop to be very mindful of the temptation of pride. Augustine had been given the power to perform miracles by God for the salvation of the Anglo-Saxons. Therefore he should not boast in himself, but remember that all his accomplishments were due to God's grace and support. The message of this letter fits within Gregory's emphasis on the need for all Church leaders to be humble and avoid the sin of conceit.[76]

Purity Issues

In his *Libellus Responsionum*, Gregory answered Augustine's questions about ritual purity: can a woman enter a church and receive communion while she is menstruating; can a man who has had intercourse and not washed himself receive communion; after giving birth, how long does a woman need to wait until she can enter a church?[77] Meens has argued that these questions arise not from contact with pagan Anglo-Saxons, but from British churchmen.[78] He believes that the British and Irish literally interpreted the Old Testament on these issues, while Gregory clearly used symbolic meanings.[79] For instance, in Leviticus it states that a woman is unclean after giving birth and must wait thirty-three days if the child is a boy, and sixty-six days if a girl before she can undergo the ritual of purification and once again be "clean."[80] Gregory, on the other hand, argues that a woman can enter a church immediately after giving

birth.[81] If Augustine raised these issues due to contact with British churchmen or those converted by the British, this would help shed light on other areas of disagreement between Augustine and the British ecclesiastics.[82]

While this theory has been supported by some historians, others point to the Frankish influence on the Kentish Church as a better source for these questions.[83] For instance, Stancliffe has argued that Caesarius of Arles used a literal interpretation of the Old Testament when he discussed many of these same issues in his sermons.[84] Remembering that Æthelberht's wife was Frankish, that she had Frankish churchmen accompany her to Kent, and that Augustine himself had Frankish priests assisting him, it seems just as likely that these questions could have arisen in response to interaction with Franks rather than Britons.

Letter of Bishop Laurence of Canterbury to the British

In the *History*, Bede preserved part of a letter from Bishops Laurence (604/10–19) of Canterbury, Mellitus of London (604–19), and Justus (604–24) of Rochester to the Irish Church.[85] Laurence writes that it was not until after he and his colleagues had arrived in Britain that they realized the British followed alternative practices. Somewhat later, they learned that the Irish did as well. Although not included in the verbatim portion of the recorded letter, Bede adds that Laurence believed that the British and Irish differed from the Church in many ways and that the Celtic-84 was a major problem. It was because of this that Laurence and his fellow bishops decided to write a letter to the Irish to warn them to adopt Catholic customs.

Bede next adds that Laurence sent a similar letter to the Britons but was unsuccessful in convincing them to abandon their alternative practices. Without the actual text of the letter, it is impossible to assess Laurence's arguments or the issues that concerned him. The letter does, however, demonstrate that Canterbury was still attempting to exercise pastoral care over the British, even after Augustine's condemnation.

Conclusion

In the early seventh century, controversy over Easter dating arose in both Britain and on the Continent. Neither the British churchmen nor Columbanus were willing to abandon the Celtic-84 due to the problems with

the Victorian table. Those following the Celtic-84 believed that the Victorian table listed a "dark" Easter by placing the equinox too early and allowing Easter to fall late in the moon's cycle. Both of these issues symbolically denied that Christ, the Light of the World, needed to die for humanity's salvation.

Unlike Merovingian Gaul, the Anglo-Saxons were still primarily pagan and the Anglo-Saxon Church was in its infancy. As such it could not afford to be divided by disputes and doubts over varying practices. It is within this framework that the differences between the Roman and British rites of baptism may have been critical. It is impossible to tell whether there was something theologically questionable about the British liturgy. That this issue does not arise again implies that either only a small group of the British used this rite and it was quickly abandoned or it was simply circumstances that created the controversy during this period. If the former, this cannot be defined as a practice of the Celtic tradition or micro-Christendom as a whole; if the latter, it does not appear to have been a matter of significant dispute.

Contrary to Bede's claims, the British Church may well have participated in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in some areas, especially those to the west and north. On the other hand, missions may have been limited for a number of reasons. First, Christianity may have been used as one element identifying the British in opposition to the Anglo-Saxons. Examining Gildas' writings, the British regarded themselves as a chosen people fighting against God's enemies. Second, in the oldest areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement, the kings and their courts would not be open to a God presented by those they had defeated.

It is also important to keep in mind the reasons that the British ecclesiastics would not acknowledge Augustine's authority. First, Augustine advocated an Easter table the British saw as incorrect and harmful to the Church. Second, the British feared political and ecclesiastical Anglo-Saxon control; Canterbury's leadership came with too many strings attached. Third, if Bede's information is correct, the British were concerned that Augustine's pride might harm his ability to correctly lead the Church. For the British, his support of an Easter table that listed dark Easters might have been the best evidence of this.

Laurence's letter demonstrates that Canterbury's overtures to the British continued even after Augustine's death. Bede only mentions Easter, but the unspecified alternative practices might have included baptism as well. Since Canterbury would still have been advocating the Victorian table at this point, it is not too surprising that the British once again refused to abandon the Celtic table.