

KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 5

K. R. DARK

Archaeology and the origins of  
Insular monasticism



HUGHES HALL  
&  
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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An important step in this transformation came with the granting of Cambridge degrees to women in 1948: the CTC was then given the status of a 'Recognised Institution', the crucial first move towards integration with the University proper. The College took the name of CTC's charismatic first Principal, the celebrated women's educationist, Elizabeth Phillips Hughes. Apart from Miss Hughes's Welsh heritage, there is no known connection between the College and the scholar now commemorated in this series of lectures.

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first and only Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College (and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon), 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982. The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. Each year's lecture will be published as a pamphlet by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic on behalf of Hughes Hall.

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First published 2006 by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic,  
University of Cambridge, 9 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DP.

ISBN 978-1-904708-15-5 / 0 904708 15 3

ISSN 1475–9098

Set in Times New Roman by Laura Hill, University of Cambridge.

Printed by the Reprographics Centre, University of Cambridge.

## **PREFACE**

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture was initiated as an annual event by Hughes Hall as the result of an anonymous benefaction in her memory and to mark the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. This benefaction came to the College as a result of an initiative taken by our Fellow, Dr Michael J. Franklin, Director of Studies in History and in Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic.

Each lecture will be published, both on the College's web-site (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>) and as a printed pamphlet, to coincide with the following year's lecture. Hughes Hall is grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic for acting as hard-copy publisher.

Hughes Hall hopes that this academic initiative will make a significant scholarly contribution in those areas which fall within the research interests of Kathleen Hughes, and that the series will continue for many years. We are pleased that it continues to be a fixed point in the College's calendar.

**Sarah Squire**  
President  
Hughes Hall



## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ORIGINS OF INSULAR MONASTICISM

Insular Church history was, of course, among those subjects to which Kathleen Hughes made an especially notable contribution, and the spread of monasticism is generally held to be a central theme of Europe-wide change in the fourth to seventh centuries AD: a defining feature of what might be termed ‘the world of Late Antiquity’. One might suppose that contemporary writers would have noted down every little detail of ecclesiastical history in this period, but sadly this was not the case. Although some areas – such as the Byzantine East – are extremely well documented, for others, texts afford little or no reliable information. In relation to Britain, written sources provide only minimal assistance in reconstructing ecclesiastical history and the origins and spread of monasticism prior to A.D. 600, the terminal date for my discussion here.<sup>1</sup>

This is not because the origins of the Romano-British Church are especially obscure. Christianity clearly came to Britain during the Roman period, and from the fourth century onwards there are a few records of British clerics. Nor is it because the role of the British Church was either marginal or minimal in the spread of belief or institutions more broadly. It was almost certainly the British who undertook missionary work outside the Western Roman Empire for the first time, into Ireland and beyond the imperial frontier to the north of Britain. Through the British Church monasticism, too, seems to have spread into both of these areas before the sixth century. So the British played an important role in making the Church a global institution, not one confined only to the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent review of the textual evidence: D.N. Dumville, ‘The origins and early history of Insular monasticism’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University* 30 (1997), 85–107.

<sup>2</sup> For British missionary activity in Ireland and North Britain: D.N. Dumville, ‘British Missionary Activity in Ireland’, in *St. Patrick AD 493–1993*, D.N. Dumville *et al.* (Woodbridge 1993), pp. 133–45; T.M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Britons in Ireland c.550–800’, in *Ildánach Ildírech. A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana*, edd. J. Carey, J.T. Koch & P-Y. Lambert (Andover & Aberystwyth 1999), pp. 15–26; K. Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Stroud

However, even in the Roman period, we have very little textual evidence for the British Church. Texts show that there were probably bishops for each of the fourth-century provinces of Roman Britain, and that these bishops were in touch with the wider world of ecclesiastical organization. There were also at least a few Roman-period martyrs: these included St Alban at Verulamium, of course, and Gildas (writing in the sixth century) tells us that there were others, although he only specifically mentions those at what he calls a ‘city of the legion’. It is conventional to assume that this place was Caerleon or Chester, but Gildas does not actually say this, and he might have meant any town with a former legionary fortress. As he tells us that this town was separated from him by the ‘hateful division with the barbarians’ – probably the zone of eastern England under ‘Anglo-Saxon’ control by the sixth century – then perhaps the likeliest options are not Caerleon or Chester, which were almost certainly west of that zone, but Colchester or Lincoln, both from Gildas’s point of view ‘behind enemy lines’. Interestingly, what is probably a fourth-century extramural church has been found at Butt Road, Colchester, and another (perhaps early fifth-century) church has been excavated at St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln.<sup>3</sup>

However, apart from confirming mainstream Church organization and witness in the face of official persecution, texts – including inscriptions – provide little help in reconstructing the Romano-British Church. To get a clearer impression of the Romano-British Church, we need to turn to archaeology, by which I mean the study of material things as a source for the past. Unlike Roman-period texts, archaeological material as a whole is extremely plentiful and new archaeological information is continually becoming available. This includes a small amount of material that probably relates directly to British monastic

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2000), pp. 203–4, 219–20, 225, 227.

<sup>3</sup> M. Winterbottom (ed. and trans.), *Gildas. The Ruin of Britain and other works* (Chichester 1978), Book I.10; M.J. Jones, ‘St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln: Britain in Europe’, in ‘*Churches Made in Antiquity*’: *Recent Work in Britain and the East Mediterranean*, ed. K.S. Painter (London 1994), pp. 325–47; N. Crummy, P. Crummy & C. Crossan, *Excavations of Roman and later cemeteries, churches and monastic sites in Colchester, 1971–88* (Colchester Archaeological Report 9, Colchester 1993).

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origins.

Archaeological evidence for the Church in Roman Britain comes almost wholly from the fourth century, and largely from eastern and southern England. There are many fourth-century artefacts, and probably even a few structures, to provide evidence for the Church in Roman Britain. The artefacts include portable objects, and larger and far less portable items – such as the series of lead baptismal fonts, mostly from Cambridgeshire and surrounding areas. There are also a few fourth-century cemeteries or individual burials that might be relevant here: notably the Poundbury cemetery just outside Dorchester in Dorset.<sup>4</sup>

Even archaeological sources may not accurately represent the extent of the Romano-British Church. Christian worship in the Roman Empire probably often took place in house-churches and these, by definition, need be no more than just rooms in ‘normal’ buildings, not even necessarily domestic buildings. Moreover, they might be used at other times for other purposes. The religious ceremonies in these, such as praying, singing, listening to readings, or dancing, might leave no physical traces. Even *agape* meals might leave the same archaeological traces as everyday dining. Purpose-built church buildings were not widely in use in the Roman Empire before 400 and, even then, churches were often in extramural locations near major towns. Moreover, such buildings may often have been simple rectangular rooms, as apses may be a late development in provincial churches. Such urban hinterlands are one of the least understood landscapes of Roman Britain and, unless decorated with symbols, churches may be hard to recognise. Christians did not universally accept the use of religious symbolism in the fourth

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<sup>4</sup> The evidence is presented in: C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London 1981); D. Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London, 1991); C. Mawer, *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain: The Small Finds* (BAR British Series 243, Oxford 1995); D. Petts, *Archaeology of Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud 2003). The evidence from Lullingstone villa has also been discussed in relation to monasticism: M. Henig, ‘The Lullingstone villa: art, religion and letters in a fourth-century villa’, *Mosaic* 24 (1997), 4–7. See also: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 18–20; K. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom. British Political Continuity 300–800* (London & New York 1994), pp. 36–8.

and fifth centuries – even in the main centres of architectural and artistic innovation in the Mediterranean. So, one could easily envisage Romano-British church buildings and liturgical vessels without any distinguishing symbols. Alternatively, religious symbols may have been used that carried meanings that are not obvious today, such as saltires, stags, hunt scenes and solar or lunar disks.<sup>5</sup>

There are also textual hints that the fifth- and sixth- century British Church was particularly conservative, and if this was true in the fourth century this may have militated against both church buildings and religious symbolism. Christians may have worshipped in houses or in the open rather than in purpose-built structures. Even in the sixth century, two British priests (Louocatus and Catiernus) in Brittany were castigated for using a portable altar in ‘huts’.<sup>6</sup>

But while conventional archaeological methods of studying the Romano-British Church may be limited by these factors, other approaches may yet bear fruit. The most promising area is, perhaps, in recognising the impact of belief on behaviour. For example, Hilary Cool has noted that changes in women’s fashion in the late fourth century might be understood in terms of a more ‘modest’ style of dress and personal adornment, with the disuse of the hairpins typically used to hold elaborate Roman hairstyles in favour of head-coverings of some sort. She interprets this in terms of changing religious attitudes to dress and appearance, and I am reminded of a reference in the ‘First Synod of St Patrick’ to women covering their heads. Likewise, Dorothy Watts, David Petts and others have argued that changes in burial practice, particularly the formal burial of infants in regular cemeteries, the increasing management of rural cemeteries and the elimination of gender

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<sup>5</sup> For the Church in the Roman Empire: P.F. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (2 vols., London 2000). On opponents of religious art (and their critics) in Late Antiquity: C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453* (Toronto 1972, reprinted 1986), pp. 16–18, 23, 41–44.

<sup>6</sup> On conservatism in the fourth- to sixth-century British Church: Dark, *Civitas*, pp. 37–8. The Breton evidence has recently been discussed by P.-R. Giot, P. Guigon & B. Merdrignac (with a preface by W. Davies) *The British Settlement of Brittany* (Stroud 2003), pp. 136–7.

differentiation in graves, may relate to the spread of religious concepts. Alternatively, it is possible that colour could carry religious associations. In particular, whitening of graves and the inclusion of white stones in them is a notable feature of Insular practice in the sixth to ninth centuries, and we can see this already in evidence in Roman Britain at Icklingham.<sup>7</sup>

Even given all of these limitations, evidence from the ‘villa landscape’ of southern and eastern Roman Britain attests the existence of the fourth-century Church in the countryside. But such evidence is largely absent from northern and western Britain. Christian communities in these areas are likely to have been numerically small, unless these communities were wholly comprised of the very conservative or very poor. Even so, there are seldom even graffiti scratched on pottery or other household objects from across this zone, in the south broadly equivalent to north and west Wales, most of Devon and Cornwall.<sup>8</sup>

However, this picture changes in the fifth century with the emergence of formal inhumation cemeteries of, usually east-west, graves over the west and north of Britain. It is not the presence of east-west orientated graves that marks out these burials, but simply the existence of such cemeteries at all. In the west of Roman Britain third- and fourth-century burials of any sort are largely absent and this continues a very long standing regional tradition of what might be termed ‘invisible’ mortuary practices (deposition in water or the exposure of the body perhaps) going back into prehistory. In Wales for example, fourth-century burials are rare apart from in the area near Caerleon, and several

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<sup>7</sup> For hair-coverings: H. Cool, ‘Roman metal hair pins from southern Britain’, *The Archaeological Journal* 147 (1992), 148–82; L. Bieler (ed.), *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin 1975), Number 6 on p. 55. For burial: D. Watts, ‘Infant burials and Romano-British Christianity’, *Archaeological Journal* 146 (1989), 372–83; D. Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud 2003), pp. 67–9, 127–132, 139–149. Icklingham is discussed by: S. West, ‘The Romano-British site at Icklingham’, *East Anglian Archaeology* 3 (1976), 63–126.

<sup>8</sup> For the term ‘villa landscape’ see: K. Dark & P. Dark, *The Landscape of Roman Britain* (Stroud 1997). For the burials: R. Philpot, *Burial practices in Roman Britain. A survey of grave treatment and furnishing A.D. 43–410* (BAR British Series 219, Oxford 1991).

cemeteries in South-East Wales that could be fourth century might equally date from the fifth or sixth century.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the fifth-century appearance of highly organised cemeteries of superficially Late Roman-style graves across western Britain represents a departure from centuries of local traditions of mortuary practice. The timing of this change, the similarity of the cemetery layouts and of precise burial rites and the subsequent history of some of the burial grounds involved, all suggest that this dramatic change might be attributed to the role of the Church in regulating burial-practice – either directly, or because of changed attitudes among those burying the dead or managing cemeteries. At the very least, it represents the widespread adoption of customs similar to those found in fifth- and sixth- century cemeteries associated with churches in other parts of Europe and the Mediterranean. Even those aspects of these western and northern British cemeteries that often seem to archaeologists the most ‘Insular’ in their cultural heritage, such as the use of stone long-cists as coffins, are standard at such fifth- to sixth-century cemeteries elsewhere in Europe and the Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup>

Taking these features of fifth-century burial as evidence of the Church in western Britain, then we can see its expansion from its eastern British fourth-century heartland to encompass the west and north of what had been Roman Britain. This raises the question of how this was achieved in communities with no towns or villas and where the Roman military had probably withdrawn comprehensively before *c.*400.

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<sup>9</sup> For examples of fifth- to seventh-century cemeteries in this zone: P. Trudgian, ‘Excavation of a burial ground at St Endellion, Cornwall’, *Cornish Archaeology* 26 (1987), 145–52. P.J. Weddell, ‘The excavation of a post-Roman cemetery near Kenn, south Devon’, *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 58, 93–126; F. Lynch & C. Musson, ‘A prehistoric and early medieval complex at Llandegai, near Bangor, North Wales’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 150 (2001), 17–142.

<sup>10</sup> D. Petts, ‘Burial in Western Britain A.D. 400–800 Late Antique or Early Medieval?’, in *Debating Late Antiquity in Britain A.D. 300–700*, edd. R. Collins & J. Gerrard (BAR British Series 365, Oxford 2004), pp. 77–87.

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The late fourth and early fifth century was a period of the rapid evangelisation of the rural landscape of northwest Gaul. This was closely associated with the growth of monasticism, especially the Martinian monastic movement, led by St Martin of Tours in the late fourth century. This broke away from the urban-centred ecclesiastical organization of fourth-century Gaul and took a more robust attitude to the elimination of rural paganism.<sup>11</sup>

By the sixth century there is no doubt that monasticism was established in western Britain. Gildas mentions monasticism in his *De Excidio*, and his Letters and the Penitentials also attest sixth-century monastic practice. St. Patrick, in his *Confessio*, also mentions monasticism, but this time in the fifth century. Although Patrick may have learnt of monasticism on his travels, at least knowledge of monasticism was present in Britain in the fifth century at the latest. Seen in this context, the fifth-century evangelisation of the most remote parts of what had been the west and north of Roman Britain might be seen as simply the consequence of the spread of monasticism into Britain with similar consequences as in Gaul.<sup>12</sup>

There are indeed hints that specifically Martinian monasticism did cross the English Channel before 500. Jeremy Knight has drawn attention to evidence that ecclesiastics with strong Martinian connections visited Britain and argued that a pre-460 version of this saint's Life reached the island. In Wales, the fifth- or sixth-century inscription from Llangian includes the name 'Martin' and Anthony Birley drew attention to the unusual name of his lieutenant 'Victricius' on an inscribed bowl from southern Britain. In a letter to Ambrose, Victricius claimed to have visited Britain. The bowl is superficially late fourth-century in date, but

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<sup>11</sup> C. Stewart, 'Monasticism', in *The Early Christian World*, ed. P.F. Esler (2 vols., London 2000), vol. 1, pp. 344–66; M. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism. From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Oxford 2003), pp. 62–4.

<sup>12</sup> M. Winterbottom (ed. and trans.), *Gildas. The Ruin of Britain and other works* (Chichester 1978), I.32; A.B.E. Hood (ed. and trans.), *St Patrick. His Writings and Muirchu's Life* (Chichester 1978), *Confessio* 41–2 (see also 49), *Epistola* 12. For the Penitentials: L. Bieler (ed.), *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin 1975), pp. 60–95.

when the inscription and an accompanying Chi-Rho were added, and for how long such bowls were produced, are unclear. Of course, the bowl need have nothing to do with Victricius himself, but it does show that this unusual name was known in the final decades of Roman Britain. Thus, on textual and epigraphic grounds alone, the Martinian mission might have spread to Britain from western Gaul in the late fourth or fifth century.<sup>13</sup>

There is one other textual hint of monasticism in Britain in the fifth century. This relates to the British usurper Constantine III, who attempted to become Western Roman emperor in 406/7. In the context of the emperor's attempt at the throne we are told that he was a poor but devout soldier, suddenly propelled to prominence, whose son Constans was a monk before he joined his father's cause. If the description of Constantine III as a poor soldier is correct, and if Constans was in Britain in 406/7, then he may have been a monk somewhere in Britain at that date.<sup>14</sup>

A connection between fifth-century Britain and fifth-century Gaul is also provided by dates for the spread of symbolism and new memorial formulae. Although extremely difficult to date accurately, inscriptions containing these suggest that fifth-century Britain was receiving the same formulae and symbolism common in fifth-century Gaul. Whether or not these actually came from Gaul, fifth-century Britain clearly needs to be seen in the same context as Gaul in terms of the spread of innovations in religious practice. Obviously, this could have included monasticism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dark, *Civitas*, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 30–1.

<sup>15</sup> For external connections indicated by epigraphic evidence: J. Knight, 'Seasoned by salt: Insular-Gallic contacts in the early memorial stones and cross-slabs', in *External Contacts and the Economy of Late and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. Dark (Woodbridge 1996), pp. 109–20; J. Knight, 'The Early Christian Latin Inscriptions of Britain and Gaul: Chronology and Context', in *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, edd. N. Edwards & A. Lane (Oxbow Monograph 16, Oxford 1992), pp. 45–50; K. Dark, 'Epigraphic, Art-Historical and Historical Approaches to the

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Sadly, textual evidence does not offer much more help regarding this, but here archaeology can again play a central role. In order for it to do so we need to be able to identify fifth- and sixth-century monasteries from among the increasing body of sites known from western and northern Britain. I shall concentrate just on the British west, the area south of the River Mersey and west of the western limit of what are conventionally termed ‘Anglo-Saxon’ sixth-century cemeteries. This area was roughly approximate to that of one of Britain’s Late Roman provinces, the province of *Britannia Prima*, so may make sense in terms of the political (and potentially cultural) geography of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. In any case, its selection as a study area will serve our purposes well.<sup>16</sup>

### **Archaeology and monastic origins in Britain**

It must be said at the beginning of any such discussion that the nature of the evidence for fifth- and sixth-century western Britain means that identifying monasteries is especially problematical. One difficulty is intrinsic to the archaeology of this whole period. Although fifth- and sixth-century western British sites can have a lot of artefacts, most of these are either superficially identical to Late Roman types or are not closely datable. Although much work has been directed toward resolving this problem, very few diagnostic fifth- or sixth-century artefacts – that is to say, categories of material always indicative of fifth- or sixth-century activity – have been recognised. The most important of these artefacts for our purpose are imported ceramics and glass, notably a series of Byzantine red-slipped wares and amphorae – the latter known in Britain as ‘B-ware’ – assigned to a fifth- to sixth-century date. There

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Chronology of Class I Inscribed Stones’, in *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, edd. N. Edwards & A. Lane (Oxbow Monograph 16 Oxford, 1992), pp. 51–61.

<sup>16</sup> For example, none of the pre-Norman monastic sites identified in Cornwall on textual grounds is known to have existed before c.700: L. Olson, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall* (Woodbridge 1989), especially map A xiv.

are also inscribed stone monuments. In particular, two groups of these are relevant here: Class-1 inscribed stones, probably tombstones of fifth century and later date, and Class-2 cross-marked stones, probably grave markers of the sixth century onward. However, for many sites, chronology remains dependent on either radiocarbon dating of bone or charcoal, or on stratigraphical arguments – which often produce dates of less certainty and wider ranges.<sup>17</sup>

But this does not mean that there is the dearth of evidence for fifth- and sixth-century western Britain that is sometimes imagined. In the last half-century at least thirty cemeteries dated to the fifth to seventh centuries have been excavated in western Britain. We know of over 100 settlements that may have been in use at this period and there are also hundreds of inscribed stones that may relate to burials of this date. But evidence for burial is not evidence of monasticism, and archaeologists long ago abandoned the view that every burial site of this date must be a ‘Celtic monastery’.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, as Philip Rahtz pointed out about 30 years ago, in archaeological terms monasteries are essentially domestic settlements with overtly ecclesiastical elements, so that it is – in theory – difficult to distinguish monastic from secular occupation. However, what this critique does not take into account is the wealth of comparative evidence from other parts of the world of Late Antiquity, enabling us to construct more detailed models of what to expect at such sites. As so often in the archaeology of Britain during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries an insularity of approach has distracted scholars from the potential of the

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<sup>17</sup> Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 38–40; E. Campbell, ‘The archaeological evidence for external trade contacts: imports, trade, and economy in Celtic Britain A.D. 400–800’, in *External Contacts and the Economy of Late and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. Dark (Woodbridge 1996), pp. 83–96.

<sup>18</sup> For the number and range of fifth- and sixth-century settlements and burials from western Britain: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, chs. 3 & 4; K. Dark, *Discovery by Design* (Oxford 1994), chs. 2 & 3.

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material.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of fifth- and sixth-century monastic sites, there are several places where one might look for comparative evidence with which to formulate our models of identification, the ‘archaeological signatures’ of fifth- and sixth-century monasticism: continental Western Europe (especially fifth-century Gaul), the Byzantine eastern Mediterranean, and the much better-documented sixth- and seventh-century societies of Ireland and Scotland. Let us, very briefly, consider each of these in turn.

Textual sources from Gaul provide us with two models: the re-use of temple sites or the conversion of villas into monasteries. Temples might be converted into churches or be replaced on the same sites by church buildings. Alternatively, the *cella*, the most sacred part of the temple to Late Roman pagans, might be used for domestic occupation by a monk. Such focal buildings and people might then attract burial within the *temenos* (the enclosure around the temple) – something that appears to have been unthinkable in Late Roman paganism.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in a British context, fourth-century temples would be an obvious place to look for early monasteries. The evidence that might be expected would be possible churches or even just domestic occupation re-using the *cella* and, if burials occurred inside the former *temenos*, this would represent evidence of changed religious use of the site.

In Gaul, we also have textual and archaeological evidence that Late Roman villas were sometimes converted into monasteries by their owners. To judge from the texts and excavated evidence, these might be distinguished by the use of villa buildings for churches or other religious structures, burial in and around the villa, and continuing domestic

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<sup>19</sup> P. Rahtz, ‘Monasteries as Settlements’, *Scottish Archaeological Forum* 5 (1973), 125–35.

<sup>20</sup> M. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism. From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Oxford 2003), pp. 62–4, 82–5.

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occupation – perhaps of a more modest sort.<sup>21</sup>

Looking further afield, archaeological and written sources from the Byzantine eastern Mediterranean offer other models. In Egypt and the Holy Land, fifth- and sixth-century monasteries fall into a few general types. The two main varieties consist of communal monasteries often inside walled rectilinear enclosures, as at St Catherine's in the Sinai or Mar Saba in Israel, and dispersed, but still monastic, settlement. The latter is exemplified by the astonishing site at Kellia, in the Egyptian desert, comprised of 1,500-1,600 small complexes across 100 square km, most about 25m x 35m with an oratory and accommodation for two or three occupants inside a walled compound containing latrines and a well. Elsewhere, there were cave-monasteries, with natural caverns used as hermitages or modified as churches and cells, and instances of extreme asceticism such as hermits living in deserts or on top of pillars (stylites). In both cases, the presence of a church or chapel and possibly burials would be keys to recognising these complexes.<sup>22</sup>

Closer to home, in Scotland and Ireland, there are a series of textually and archaeologically identified monastic sites where burial and domestic activity are juxtaposed within the same settlement; this is entirely absent from secular domestic sites of the same period. This pattern led me to suggest in 1994 that there was a strongly 'bounded' relationship between sacred and profane space in the Insular Celtic world of the fifth- to -seventh centuries – a suggestion even more strongly

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<sup>21</sup> J. Percival, 'The Fifth-Century Villa: New Life or Death Postponed?', in *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?*, edd. J. Drinkwater & H. Elton (Cambridge 1992), pp. 156–164; J. Percival, 'Villa and monasteries in late Roman Gaul', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48.1 (1997), 1–21.

<sup>22</sup> For examples: B. Brenk, *The Christianization of the Late Roman period: Cities, churches, synagogues, palaces, private houses and monasteries in the Early Christian Period* (London 2003); R. Krautheimer with S. Ćurčić, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Harmondsworth 1988); J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The Monasteries of Palestine* (Oxford 1994), pp. 314–631; Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judaean monasteries in the Byzantine period* (New Haven 1992); N. Aravecchia, 'Hermitages and Spatial Analysis: Use of Space at Kellia', in *Shaping Community: The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism*, ed. S. McNally (Oxford 2001), pp. 29–38.

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supported by subsequent archaeological work. This offers us a way of overcoming the significant problem posed by Rahtz, that any settlement might, in theory, have a church or burials: in fact, in an Insular British or Irish context during the fifth to seventh centuries religious and secular space may have been strictly ‘bounded’.<sup>23</sup>

Using these data we can formulate a series of three models for the identification of monasteries in fifth- and sixth-century western Britain:

- A: Late Roman rural temple sites with rectangular east-west fifth- or sixth-century structures and/or domestic occupation incorporating or adjacent to the former *cella*
- B: Late Roman villas with fifth- or sixth-century religious use
- C: Settlements where fifth- or sixth-century burial and domestic activity co-existed side-by-side

Of course, one must not forget those few sites where texts or inscriptions directly identify a monastic community. This gives us a fourth model:

- D: Monastic activity during the fifth or sixth century attested by written evidence

Applying these models to all known fifth- and sixth-century sites in the selected part of western Britain, a series of sites is drawn to our attention:

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<sup>23</sup> K. Dark, *Discovery*, ch. 2 sets out the evidence and theoretical basis for the strict separation between sacred and secular space among the fifth- to seventh-century Britons and Irish.

***Model A: Late Roman rural temple sites with rectangular East-West fifth- or sixth- century structures and/or domestic occupation incorporating or adjacent to the former cella***

In relation to Model A: Late Roman rural temple sites with rectangular east-west structures and/or domestic occupation, incorporating or adjacent to the former *cella*, in approximately decreasing order of likelihood there are the following sites:

At Brean Down, a rectangular east-west structure was constructed after the partial demolition of the fourth-century temple and fifth- to seventh-century burials were found within the former *temenos* – one burial even cutting through the temple ruin. The structure is church-like and might well have had a religious function, but it also seems to be associated with domestic material, suggesting the possibility of a combined religious and domestic role – perhaps as a monastic cell. Whether or not the latter was the case, Brean Down definitely seems to have the requisite criteria for a possible monastic site.<sup>24</sup>

Another very similar site has been excavated at Lamyatt Beacon, also in Somerset. A rectangular east-west structure replaced the temple and fifth- to seventh-century burial took place within its *temenos*. This also includes a church-like building possibly associated with domestic material, like that at Brean Down. So it can be considered as another possible monastic site.<sup>25</sup>

The fourth-century temple at Uley in Gloucestershire has more

<sup>24</sup> A.M. Apsimon, 'The Roman temple on Brean Down, Somerset', *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Speleological Society* 10.3 (1965), 195–258; M. Bell, *Brean Down Excavations 1983-1987* (English Heritage Archaeological Reports 15, London 1990); D. Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud 2003), pp. 69 and 71.

<sup>25</sup> R. Leech, 'The excavation of a Romano-British temple and later cemetery at Lamyatt Beacon, Somerset', *Britannia* 17 (1986), 259–328; D. Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud 2003), pp. 69 and 71–3. There may have been a later boundary bank (a monastic *vallum*?) around the temple site: S. Pearce, *South-western Britain in the Early Middle Ages* (London & New York 2004), p. 112; P. Rahtz, S. Hirst & S.M. Wright, *Cannington Cemetery* (Britannia Monograph 17, London 2000), pp. 419–20.

evidence of post-temple activity, including a possible church and domestic occupation within the former temple *temenos*. Although detailed interpretation is unclear, there were probably post-Roman structures incorporating the *cella*, and the settlement was within a univallate enclosure. So, again there is a strong case for monastic occupation. This is dated by organically-tempered pottery (also called grass-tempered pottery) to the fifth or sixth century and although it has been claimed that fragments of glass from the site date the rectangular church-like structure to the seventh or eighth century, identical glass also occurs on fourth-century sites and the glass does not certainly come from the possible church.<sup>26</sup>

The famous fifth- to seventh- century cemetery at Cannington has not generally been considered as a possible monastic settlement. However, the exemplary full publication of the cemetery has revealed rather more domestic features than might be expected, or than are found at our rapidly increasing number of other burial sites. A circular structure on the hill-top, possibly a fourth-century pagan shrine, was replaced by an extensive fifth- to seventh-century cemetery containing at least three structures. One has been identified as a possible church, while another seems to have been associated with metalworking. Much occupation debris included imported and local fifth- and/or sixth-century pottery and an early burial is located within the summit structure, suggesting its deliberate slighting. So, I would consider this as another possible

<sup>26</sup> A. Woodward & P. Leech, *The Uley Shrines. Excavation of a Ritual Complex on West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire, 1977-9* (English Heritage Archaeological Report 17, London 1993); D. Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain* (Stroud, 2003), pp. 70–71. For glass similar to that at Uley: D. Allen with J. Price, 'III.3 The Glass', in *Late Iron Age and Roman Silchester. Excavations on the Site of the Forum-Basilica 1977, 1980–86*, edd. M. Fulford & J. Timby (Britannia Monograph 15, London 200), pp. 312–9 (esp. 314). Objections to the excavators' interpretation of the site have been raised by Painter: K. Painter, 'Natives, Romans and Christians at Uley? Questions of continuity of use at sacred sites', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1999), 156–75. But these have been countered in: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 123–4, n.38, 243. It is, for example, simply not true to say that temple-church conversions in Late Antiquity are unknown elsewhere. For examples, see: J-M. Spieser, 'VI The Christianisation of Pagan Sanctuaries in Greece', and 'Addendum', pp. 5–8 in his *Urban and Religious Space in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium* (Aldershot 2001).

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monastic settlement.<sup>27</sup>

Nettleton was a large fourth-century ‘temple settlement’ in Wiltshire with a complex history. In a final phase, a rectangular east-west structure was associated with a cemetery and a post-temple enclosure, with fifth-or sixth-century glass dating this period of activity. Thus, this too might – more tentatively – be seen as a possible monastic site, where burials and a church replaced a temple and were contemporary with domestic occupation.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the enigmatic Blaise Castle (again in Somerset) has a superficially ‘Late Roman’ rectangular east-west structure, with an altar-like setting above a burial, surrounded by other burials. Judging from the finds – including numerous Roman coins – this might have been a temple re-used as a church, unless it was a rural Romano-British (or fifth-century) church. Here, the evidence is more problematical, and although this could be yet another monastic re-use of a temple, no domestic occupation was identified.<sup>29</sup>

This brings us to the second, smaller, group of sites:

### ***Model B. Late Roman villas with fifth-and sixth-century religious use***

Recent excavation of a Late Roman villa at Bradford on Avon has shown that the main reception room of the principal villa building was at least partly re-used for what may be a fifth-century baptistery. As it re-uses the main reception room of the complex, its Late Roman focus, this might represent the re-use of the villa for ecclesiastical, potentially

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<sup>27</sup> Rahtz, Hirst & Wright, *Cannington Cemetery*, pp. 419–20, 427, esp. fig.20 39, 38–57, 397–400.

<sup>28</sup> For the site: W. Wedlake, *Excavation of the shrine of Apollo at Nettleton, Wilts 1956–1971* (Society of Antiquaries Research Report 40, London 1982). For the enclosure bank: Woodward & Leach, *The Uley Shrines*, p. 321. For comments and reinterpretations: Petts, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, pp. 71–3.

<sup>29</sup> For Blaise Castle see: Dark, *Discovery By Design* p. 169.

monastic, purposes. The same point might apply to Chedworth, where the *nymphaeum* was decorated with Late Roman-style Chi-Rho symbols at a late- or immediately post-Roman date, perhaps for use as a baptistery. The villa buildings were in use in the late fourth and, probably, fifth centuries.<sup>30</sup>

At Llandough in southeast Wales, where stone monuments suggest a later pre-Norman monastery, there was a long sequence of inhumations ranging from the Late Roman period to the twelfth century, partly contemporary with the medieval monastic buildings overlying a fourth-century villa. The sequence may, therefore, run from the fourth-century Romano-British villa and its cemetery to the medieval monastic complex but direct proof of fifth- or sixth-century domestic occupation is lacking.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the villa at Llantwit Major perhaps presents a similar sequence to nearby Llandough, with undated burials and a sherd of a crucible type paralleled at Dinas Powys. The latter could have been associated with metalworking in the former villa baths. This might suggest the juxtaposition of domestic and burial evidence identifying the site as monastic, and this was, of course, the site of a major pre-Norman monastery, but current evidence is of too poor a quality to tell.<sup>32</sup>

The evidence for other settlements with associated burials is somewhat stronger, enabling them to be included in our list.

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<sup>30</sup> M. Corney, *The Roman Villa at Bradford On Avon. The Investigations of 2002* (Bradford on Avon, 2003); M. Corney, *The Roman Villa at Bradford On Avon* (Bradford on Avon 2003), esp. pp. 16–19. I am grateful to Mark Corney for his invitation to visit the site just after the baptistery had been discovered, and for taking the time to show me this in detail during the excavation. For Chedworth: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 116.

<sup>31</sup> For Llandough: H. James, 'Early medieval cemeteries in Wales', in *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, edd. N. Edwards & A. Lane (Oxbow Monograph 16, Oxford 1992), pp. 90–103 (p. 98). [http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/lldough\\_cadw\\_2004/](http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/lldough_cadw_2004/)

<sup>32</sup> There were also discs cut from wall plaster, perhaps analogous to those found in fifth- or sixth-century contexts at the Baths Basilica site at Wroxeter: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 115. See also: R. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London 1989), p. 100.

***Model C. Settlements of the fifth or sixth century where burial and domestic activity co-existed side-by-side***

Excavations on top of Glastonbury Tor revealed a sixth-century settlement with at least two burials and a freestanding drystone tomb-like feature which might have been a shrine, although of course without an inscription this cannot be demonstrated.<sup>33</sup>

The important new site at Carhampton in west Somerset was a sixth-century and later domestic settlement with a long sequence of burial culminating in a medieval monastic complex.<sup>34</sup>

Poundbury, best known for its Late Roman cemetery, is immediately outside of the walls of Roman Dorchester in Dorset. Fifth-century, perhaps courtyard plan, structures succeeded the main Late Roman cemetery and these were followed by a univallate enclosure perhaps associated with burials and containing buildings, apparently including an apsidal structure. This could, perhaps be interpreted as a sub-Roman ‘villa’ turned into a monastery, or as a monastic settlement from the outset, if burial took place alongside the domestic occupation.<sup>35</sup>

Another site with both domestic occupation and burial is Llanelen in the Gower peninsula, about 15km west of Swansea. Domestic and burial evidence and a possible enclosure seem to belong to the fifth to

<sup>33</sup> P.A. Rahtz, ‘Excavations at Glastonbury Tor’, *The Archaeological Journal* 127 (1971), 1–81; P. Rahtz, *Glastonbury* (London 1993); Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 122–3, n. 44 138; P. Rahtz & L. Watts, *Glastonbury: Myth and Archaeology* (Stroud 2004).

<sup>34</sup> C. & N. Hollinrake, ‘Archaeological Evaluations at Carhampton, Somerset, 1993–1994’, forthcoming. I am grateful to Nancy and Charlie Hollinrake for showing me the imported pottery from Carhampton, discussing the site with me at length, and providing a copy of their unpublished final report on the excavation. See also: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 161.

<sup>35</sup> C. Sparey-Green, ‘Poundbury, Dorset: Settlement and Economy in Late and post-Roman Dorchester’, in *External Contacts and the Economy of Late and Post-Roman Britain*, ed. K. Dark (Woodbridge 1996), pp. 121–52; C. Sparey-Green, ‘Living amongst the dead: From Roman cemetery to post-Roman monastic settlement at Poundbury’, in *Debating Late Antiquity in Britain A.D. 300–700*, edd. R. Collins & J. Gerrard (BAR British Series 365, Oxford 2004), pp. 103–11.

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eighth centuries, and imported glass was found at the site.<sup>36</sup>

A similar site at Burry Holms, a small offshore island also on the Gower coast, apparently showed domestic evidence and a possible church below a small twelfth-century and later monastic complex. But no dating evidence was found, and the evidence remains unpublished in full and unclear from interim accounts. Similarly, it is unclear on chronological grounds whether burial and fifth- or sixth-century domestic use took place in close association at Shepton Mallett in Somerset.<sup>37</sup>

#### ***Model D. Fifth- to sixth-century monasteries attested by written evidence***

The only localities with strong epigraphic evidence for a fifth- or sixth-century monastic community are Aberdaron, where a Class-1 inscription (Nash-Williams number 77) refers to a priest's burial with a multitude of his brothers, and the nearby site of Llangian, with another Class-1 inscribed stone (Nash-Williams number 92) recording a 'son of Martin' who was a doctor, perhaps also alluding to a monastic community. Material from repairs to the south side of Llangian churchyard enclosure gave a radiocarbon sample dated to CAL AD 430-670.<sup>38</sup>

Very few sites might be indicated by other texts. Disregarding the Llandaff charters and the *Vita (Prima) Sancti Samsonis* as unreliable sources for this period, and focussing only on monasteries that sixth- or seventh-century texts suggest were in existence before 600, there are

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<sup>36</sup> A. Schlesinger & C. Walls with J. Kissock *et al.*, 'An Early Church and Medieval Farmstead Site: Excavations at Llanelen, Gower', *The Archaeological Journal* 153 (1996), 104–47, 109–14, 125–9, 136–8.

<sup>37</sup> For Burry Holms: D.B. Hague, 'Some Welsh Evidence', *Scottish Archaeological Forum* 5 (1973), 17–35 (esp. 29–32). For Shepton Mallett: P. Leach, *Excavation of A Romano-British Roadside Settlement in Somerset. Fosse Lane Shepton Mallett 1990* (Britannia Monographs 18, London 2001), pp. 95–7 especially 95 and 97.

<sup>38</sup> Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 177.

only a handful of possibilities. The one monastery specifically associated with what may be a surviving penitential from this period is St David's. A cluster of medieval chapels (including St Non's, St Patrick's and St Stinian's), long-cist burials and pre-Norman sculpture are attested in the countryside surrounding the present cathedral. But the present site is only evidenced from the ninth century and the only fifth- or sixth-century inscription close by is from Carnhedryn Farm, not the cathedral.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, there are several more distant sites that could, in principle, have contained the original monastic centre. At Llandewibrefi an inscribed stone directly refers to David, albeit in the context of church property in general rather than specifying the main monastic centre. Another possibility that has not, so far as I am aware, attracted much discussion, is Ramsey Island, which has a medieval chapel probably dedicated to David, a long-cist cemetery earlier than this chapel and probably associated with the cemetery, a – perhaps eighth-century – inscription.

There are also a few other sites that might, but need not, fit these models and so could potentially have been monastic at this date:

Bede describes the monastery at Bangor on Dee in the early seventh century, divided into seven sections of over 300 monks. A monastery of such a size has often been thought to be impossible but – as we have seen from Kellia – this need not have required one huge monastic complex. Nevertheless, Bede does not tell us that Bangor on

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<sup>39</sup> For the dating of *Vita (Prima) Sancti Samsonis*, see: P. Flobert (ed. and trans.), *Le Vie Ancienne de Saint Samson de Dol* (Paris 1997). The possibility that the account of Samson's travels indicates a pre-Viking routeway across the Cornish peninsula is nevertheless unaffected by this re-dating: Dark, *Civitas*, pp. 92–3. On St David's: H. James, 'The cult of St David in the middle ages', in *In Search of Cult: Archaeological Investigations in Honour of Philip Rahtz*, ed. M. Carver (Woodbridge 1993), pp. 105–112; N. Edwards, 'Monuments in a landscape. The early medieval sculpture of St David's', in *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain*, edd. H. Hamerow & A. MacGregor (Oxford 2001), pp. 53–77. The textual evidence is discussed in: D.N. Dumville, *St David of Wales* (Cambridge 2001).

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Dee existed before 600.<sup>40</sup>

What may be fifth-century or later burials were found inside the *temenos* of the fourth-century temple at Maiden Castle in Dorset, but excavations at Henley Wood in Somerset seem to show that not all burial in disused temples was associated with domestic occupation or with a church. So here it is unclear whether one is looking at a monastery, or just a cemetery.<sup>41</sup>

At Bath, the Late Roman ‘temple settlement’ within the so-called ‘town walls’, probably the *temenos* enclosure, was occupied in the fifth or sixth century by people using organically-tempered pottery. Barry Cunliffe’s excavation found possible traces of a rectangular east-west timber-framed structure overlying the main temple area, while votive deposition may have continued in the famous spring. However, whether this use represents religious conversion or the retreat of the nearby small-town within the Roman-period wall for its defensive potential is unclear.<sup>42</sup>

The small cluster of Late Roman buildings at Bradley Hill in Somerset may have been a farm or a villa, and a cemetery of east-west burials grew up next to and within one its buildings. However, it is unclear whether the settlement remained in use during the period of the burials –if so this would be another site where burial and domestic activity took place side-by-side.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> B. Colgrave & R.A.B. Mynors (ed. and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford 1979), II.2.

<sup>41</sup> P. Rahtz & L. Watts, ‘The end of Roman temples in the west of Britain’, in *The End of Roman Britain*, ed. P.J. Casey (BAR British series, Oxford 1979), pp. 183–210 (fig. 12); L. Watts & P. Leach, *Henley Wood, Temples and Cemetery Excavations 1962-69* (Council for British Archaeology Report 99, London 1996).

<sup>42</sup> Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 111. B. Cunliffe & P. Davenport, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath* (2 vols., Oxford 1985), vol.1; B. Cunliffe (ed.), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath* (2 vols., Oxford 1988), vol.2 .

<sup>43</sup> R.H. Leech, ‘The excavation of a Romano-British farmstead and cemetery on Bradley Hill, Somerset’, *Britannia* 12 (1981), 177–252. See also: J. Gerrard, ‘Bradley Hill, Somerset, and

A case might also be proposed for the offshore islands of St Michael's Mount and Looe Island in Cornwall and Caldey Island in Wales. Recent finds at St Michael's Mount include B-ware, fifth- to seventh- century glass and perhaps local pottery, suggesting a settlement focussed on the harbour and on the highest part of the island. At Looe Island, undated long-cists and a sherd of B-ware were found close to a medieval chapel. Olson argued from later medieval textual evidence that both islands were used for pre-Norman monasteries but neither site has definite evidence of fifth- or sixth-century burial.<sup>44</sup>

These islands might highlight yet another site, so far as I know, previously undiscussed in this context: Burgh Island.<sup>45</sup>

Burgh Island is a tidal island on Bigbury Bay near Bantham in south Devon. The island is somewhat similar to St Michael's Mount and was known as St Michael's Island in the late middle ages. The summit was used for a small medieval chapel, located where a ruinous huer's hut stands today. My own ongoing excavation and survey has found imported B-ware amphora suggesting a settlement in the area of Herring Cove, the best natural landing place on the island. However, once again burial evidence is lacking.<sup>46</sup>

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the end of Roman Britain: a study in continuity?' *Proceedings of the Somerset Natural History and Archaeological Society* 148 (2005), 1-9; Rahtz *et al.*, *Cannington Cemetery*, pp. 419–20. On the monastic interpretation: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> P. Herring, *A report on an archaeological evaluation of St Michael's Mount* (Truro 1993); P. Herring, *St Michael's Mount. Archaeological Works, 1999–8* (Truro, 2000), pp. 95–8, 120–24. For additional material from the island: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, p. 167. For Looe Island: L. Olson, 'Lammana, West Looe: C.K. Andrews' excavations of the Chapel and Monks House, 1935–6', *Cornish Archaeology* 33 (1994), 115–29.

<sup>45</sup> The 2003–4 excavations at Burgh Island are as yet unpublished.

<sup>46</sup> For Bantham: J. May & P. Weddell, 'Bantham: a Dark Age puzzle', *Current Archaeology* 178 (2002), 420–22; W. Horner, 'Secrets of the Sands', *Devon Archaeological Society Newsletter* 78 (2001), 8–9; R.J. Sylvester, 'An excavation on the Post-Roman site at Bantham, South Devon', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 39 (1981), 89–118; F.M. Griffith, 'Salvage observations at the Dark Age site at Bantham Ham, Thurlestone, in 1982', *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 44 (1986), 39–57. Nearby Oldaport has also been suggested as a possible monastic site, nothing suggesting fifth- to seventh-century activity

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Whether or not any of this latter group of sites was an early monastery, obviously not even all of the sites in the other groups fit the models equally well, and so monastic use is not equally plausible at them all. Nevertheless, the few sites that can be suggested as fifth- or sixth-century monasteries form a series of patterns that are not the outcome of the method used to identify them.

### **Pattern recognition**

First, sites in categories A and B are wholly within the West Country, with the possible exceptions of Llandough and Llantwit in southeast Wales. Second, sites to the west of this group are at localities without known Romano-British settlement, whereas all the West Country sites (with the lone exception of Glastonbury Tor) have evidence of Late Roman use. Inscribed stones and imported Mediterranean pottery were not found at the West Country sites – except for Glastonbury Tor.

Thus, we can see a clear – but not absolute – difference between what I shall term the ‘West Country Group’ (all of the former temple sites, Bradford on Avon, Glastonbury Tor and possibly Chedworth and Poundbury), and what I shall term the ‘Western Group’: consisting of Carhampton, Llanelen, Aberdaron, Llangian and St David’s. If Burry Holms, Caldey Island, Looe Island, St Michael’s Mount, and Burgh Island were monastic sites, they would also fit into the Western Group. Llandough and Llantwit might be grouped for this purpose with the West Country sites, sharing the same Late Roman background in the fourth-century villa landscape.

This difference between these two groups appears to be partly chronological: none of the Western Group need pre-date the sixth

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has been found and it would not fit the models proposed here: M.E. Farley & R.I. Little, ‘Oldaport, Modbury: a reassessment of the fort and harbour’, *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 26 (1968), 31–6; P. Rainbird, ‘Oldaport and the Anglo-Saxon defence of Devon’, *Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society* 56 (1998), 153–64.

century, while the Roman-style mortared stone rectangular buildings in the West Country Group probably originated in the late fourth or early fifth century, after which we have no evidence for totally new masonry buildings before the seventh century. The artefacts associated with the structures are wholly Romano-British in character – again possibly suggesting an origin in the late fourth or early fifth century, although such objects may well have remained in use until long after A.D. 500, as at the Wroxeter Baths Basilica site.<sup>47</sup>

This chronological distinction implies, therefore, that the Western Group may post-date those in the West Country, but the latter were not wholly disused. Burials at Brean Down and Lamyatt Beacon have radiocarbon dates covering at least the fifth to seventh centuries. At both Nettleton and Uley we see artefacts that might date to the sixth rather than the fifth century, and Llandough has radiocarbon dates attesting continuing burial.

Thus, if these are monastic sites, those in the West Country may form a consistently earlier group. Of course, it is possible that these chronological relationships might alter if we had more dating evidence for these sites, but this is true of many widely accepted archaeological patterns, and one must necessarily work from the actual evidence available rather than what might potentially exist.

At this stage, it is worth saying what these distributions do not represent. They are not simply mirroring the distribution of fifth- to

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<sup>47</sup> For the latest dateable ‘Romano-British’ artefacts: H.E.M. Cool, ‘The parts left over: material culture into the fifth century’, in *The Late Roman Transition in the North*, edd. T. Wilmott & P. Wilson (BAR British Series 293, Oxford 2000), pp. 47–65. The patterns of artefact-choice identified by Cool in relation to the early fifth century can still be seen in late fifth- and sixth-century assemblages in western Britain: Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 136–144, note 66 on p. 244. Thus, many apparently Roman-period objects may have been in use in the late fifth and sixth centuries. For the possible fifth-century manufacture of ‘Romano-British’ pottery: J. Gerrard, ‘How late is late? Pottery and the fifth century in southwest Britain’, in *Debating Late Antiquity in Britain A.D. 300–700*, edd. R. Collins & J. Gerrard (BAR British Series 365, Oxford 2004), pp. 65–75; Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, pp. 55, 102–3, 108, 141.

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sixth-century burials, or imported ceramics and glass of this date, or of Class-1 or Class-2 inscriptions. Nor do they reflect the complete distribution of any particular sort of topographical situation. Neither are these distributions just a product of the distributions of fourth-century temples and villas, nor of archaeological work on sites of this period, nor the distribution of scholars with special interests in identifying fifth- or sixth-century activity. So they seem to be real, fifth- or sixth-century, distributions – not artefacts of archaeological work.

So, at present at least, one may accept that the earliest monastic sites known from Britain may be those found in the West Country. From these sites, it would appear that monasticism developed in the late fourth or early fifth century and in ways akin to its early growth in Gaul: through the replacement of temple sites with small monastic establishments and through the conversion of villas to monasteries, probably by their owners. Yet these monasteries show no evidence of an intrusive population. In terms of their structures and the rest of their material culture they relate wholly to the late Romano-British past.

Of course, this does not prove the late fourth-century spread of monasticism to Britain from Gaul, but it suggests that there is an archaeological case for identifying the earliest British monasteries as belonging to the late fourth or early fifth centuries and that a later distribution of monastic sites can be traced across Wales and southwest England. This suggests a new outline for the origins and spread of monasticism in Britain before 600, but it is not the whole story that we can extract from this evidence.

The most striking topographical characteristic of the Western Group is their coastal distribution. All are either on or near the coast or very close to major rivers.

This raises the possibility that monasticism spread by maritime contacts, ecclesiastical or not, along the Severn coasts and across the north Welsh coast at some time in (or before) the sixth century. If such

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contacts did not exist, it is difficult to explain this pattern and other evidence can also be brought to bear on this question.

The known distribution of fifth- to sixth-century long-cist cemeteries in western Britain is strikingly coastal and riverine. Long-cists may again suggest contacts with areas further east, because Philpott's corpus of Romano-British burial has made it clear that this type of burial was a particular (although not exclusive) characteristic of the fourth-century West Country. Thus, if this distribution reflects fifth- and sixth-century burial practice, then it also probably represents sea-borne interaction, and possibly interaction with the West Country.<sup>48</sup>

Several scholars, in particular Lynette Olson and Ann Preston-Jones, have suggested that a shared ecclesiastical material culture emerged in southwest Wales and southwest England during the sixth century, and have interpreted this as the evangelisation of southwest England from south Wales. However, there is no reason why the pattern of shared characteristics that they observe might not have originated from a simultaneous phase of contact between both sides of the Severn and ecclesiastical culture from outside of this area. Thus, it is possible to interpret this pattern as further evidence for the introduction of new ecclesiastical concepts from the West Country, brought by maritime contacts along the south coast of Wales and the coasts of Devon and Cornwall.<sup>49</sup>

This is strongly reminiscent of the 'Age of the Saints' model of sea-borne monastic evangelisation, once very popular among scholars of 'Celtic Studies' and 'Dark Age' archaeology. This envisaged 'Celtic saints' acting as monastic founders in Ireland, Wales and the west of

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<sup>48</sup> R. Philpott, *Burial practices in Roman Britain. A survey of grave treatment and furnishing A.D. 43–410* (BAR British Series 219, Oxford 1991). For a distribution map of long-cist burials possibly dating to the fifth to seventh centuries: *Dark, Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, fig. 45 on p. 160.

<sup>49</sup> L. Olson, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall* (Woodbridge 1989), pp. 48, 50, 105; A. Preston-Jones, 'Decoding Cornish churchyards', in *The Early Church and Wales and the West*, edd. N. Edwards & A. Lane (Oxbow Monograph 16, Oxford 1992), pp. 104–24.

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Britain more generally through sea-borne missions. However, it would suggest that such activity occurred (initially at least) as a result of contacts with the West Country in the fifth century rather than wandering monks from Ireland, Wales or Cornwall in the sixth. This would explain at least some of the large number of anomalous dedications to ‘Celtic Saints’ found across Wales and the Southwest, as the outcome of the veneration of locally active monastic founders as saints – perhaps even at the monasteries they themselves had founded. Of course, it was perfectly normal in Late Antiquity for people considered holy to be accorded the title *sancti* so, through this archaeological study, one might see both the origins of Insular monasticism and a real ‘Age of the Saints’ in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> J.E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales to the Edwardian Conquest* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 2 vols., London 1939), I. 124-61.

*The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic offers programmes of study, at both undergraduate and graduate level, on the pre-Norman culture of Britain and Ireland in its various aspects: historical, literary, linguistic, palaeographical, archaeological. The Department also serves as a focal point for scholars visiting Cambridge from various parts of the world, who are attracted to Cambridge by the University Library (one of the largest in the world), the collections of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic manuscripts in the University and various college libraries, the collection of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Scandinavian coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum, or the rich collection of Anglo-Saxon artefacts in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It is possible for the Department to host a small number of Visiting Scholars each year.*

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