The origins and early history of Insular monasticism: 

aspects of literature, christianity, and society 

in Britain and Ireland, A.D. 400—600

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Monasticism seems to have been a significant force in the sixth- and seventh-century development of christianity in the British Isles.\(^1\) Modern accounts of this role still bear the impression left by a century of scholarship which took for granted the existence, and indeed the centrality, of the concept of a 'Celtic Church' which has now evaporated from the perceptions of students of early mediaeval Insular ecclesiastical history.\(^2\) It is perhaps inevitable but nonetheless ironic that, as historians of this phase and area of Church-history have learned the necessity to particularise rather than generalise,\(^3\) the one period in which perceptions of an Insular ecclesiastical commonality may be observed to have existed has received a radically diminished amount of scholarly attention.\(^4\)

Christianity was not new to Britain in the sixth century; but it remains very uncertain at how early a date monasticism began to find proponents and practitioners there. During the fifth century evangelisation of the Irish had begun in earnest, a process in

1) This paper was conceived in the stimulating atmosphere of the University of California at Los Angeles where I had the privilege of serving as Visiting Professor of Celtic Studies in the Spring Term, 1995. There I am particularly indebted to Patrick Geary and Joseph Nagy. The paper was tried out twice as a lecture, to a meeting convened by Robin Chapman Stacey at the University of Washington (Seattle) and to the Berkeley Celtic Colloquium: I am indebted to my audiences and hosts at both Universities for stimulating discussion. The text was prepared for publication partly at UCLA, partly while I enjoyed the hospitality of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University, Osaka, in June, 1995, for which I express my grateful thanks, and partly during a productive visit in 1996 to the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.


which British churchmen played a significant role.\(^5\) Given what has usually appeared to be the exceptional place occupied by monasticism in Irish Christianity of the early and central middle ages, it is desirable that as clear a view as possible should be gained of whether monasticism was introduced in the founding era. It remains to be determined where the origins of the explosion of enthusiasm for the monastic life—which was already a feature of Insular Christianity in the second half of the sixth century—should be located in time and space. These questions need to be taken in the twin contexts of the early history both of the monastic movement in Western Europe at large and of Christianity as a whole in Britain.

Gaulish monasticism, as the presumed source of its Insular counterpart, seems to have originated in the second half of the fourth century.\(^6\) Two streams of monastic practice and development are visible in the history and literature of Gaulish Christianity before A.D. 500. One, associated with St Martin, bishop of Tours (ob. 397), and his disciples, was influential in Western Gaul: Sulpicius Severus and Victorius of Rouen were its principal early writers. The other, centred on monasteries at Lerins and Marseille on the southeastern coast of Gaul, is particularly represented by John Cassian, Hilary of Arles, and Vincent of Lerins: their influence was felt especially on the Mediterranean coast of Gaul and in the Rhône Valley. Each of these tendencies developed its own emphases in monastic practice, spirituality, and theology; each had its own separate connections with the Near-Eastern wellsprings of monasticism; and each acquired its own political connections within Gaul. It has long been observed that these two monastic movements developed independently of the other, even to the extent that each may be said to have avoided openly acknowledging the existence of the other. Only in the sixth century do we find evident mutual influence and the impact of both on the larger development of monasticism in Gaul.

Connections of these two Gaulish monastic movements with British Christianity have long been urged, but the evidence discussed has been of questionable value for the early period under discussion. What does seem certain, however, is that Victorius of Rouen came to Britain ca 400 in connexion with an ecclesiastical dispute:\(^7\) the context, which would be of critical importance in estimating the role of Martinian monasticism in fifth-century

\(^6\) For what follows see Friedrich Prinz, Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich (München: Oldenbourg 1965), pp. 19—22, 452—61.
Britain, is unfortunately lost to us, however. Contacts may have expanded later in the fifth century as a result of British settlement in western Gaul (and particularly in what was to become Brittany), but ecclesiastical conflict followed secular precedent. In the period ca 400 other Christian ascetic movements were also important: that associated with Pelagius, a Briton or Irishman, developed in the Mediterranean world but, after its condemnation in 418, Pelagianism seems to have acquired particular significance among the Christians of what was in fact (if perhaps not yet in all contemporaries’ perceptions) a Britain newly independent of the rest of the Roman empire. What had been denounced as a heresy in 418 had a history of uncertain duration and importance in the British Isles after the 430s, but we must note that in southern Gaul monastic theology seems to have been sympathetic to some aspects of Pelagian teaching and continued to be so into the sixth century. A conduit between the two regions, Britain and southeastern Gaul, may be found in the person of Faustus, a fifth-century Briton associated with Lerins who became bishop of Riez. Britain in this era was not cut off from ecclesiastical contact with Gaul and the Mediterranean world, but after the mid-fifth century the routes used and the frequency of interaction must have changed in response to Anglo-Saxon conquest and settlement in eastern and southern Britain, which itself seems to have provoked the waves of British emigration already mentioned. Beginning in the later fifth century, British inscriptive evidence allows us to see ecclesiastical contacts with central and southern Gaul, and perhaps even with Rome, while the archaeological evidence of imported pottery provides tangible testimony for some interaction with North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. It remains far from clear, however, whether or to what

8) For the context see D. Fahy, ‘When did Britons become Bretons? A note on the foundation of Brittany’, Welsh History Review 2 (1964/5) 111–24, including the presence of Mansuetus, episcopus Britannorum, at the Synod of Tours in November 461.
extent these connexions provided conduits for monastic influence to flow into Britain. What is certain is that some British ecclesiastics of the fifth and early sixth centuries were responsive to monastic stimuli, by whatever route or routes these were mediated.

The British christianity which ultimately received monasticism in this period already had a lengthy history; but it was a history marked by a series of renewals, of which the reception of monasticism was merely the latest. We can be certain—on the evidence of the Passiones Sancti Albani, which derive from a work of Romano-British date—that christianity was sufficiently prevalent in third-century Britain to have attracted persecution. In the sixth century, Gildas wrote that many martyria and cults were witness to the Church's self-renewal after the anti-christian pogroms had run their course. Already at the beginning of the fourth century we can see a British ecclesiastical hierarchy in place and participating in Church-councils held on the Continent—at Arles in 314, Sardica in 343, and Rimini in 359. We may take it that an essentially urban-based Church was established throughout the Roman civil diocese. The principal question about christianity in fourth-century Britain concerns the extent of its diffusion across the population, both geographically and in relation to other religions. What seems certain is that it enjoyed a rising curve of expansion during the century. Supporting archaeological evidence continues to accumulate, even though places of christian worship have remained stubbornly elusive. The army and the small towns were penetrated by christianity, while in the countryside there is evidence for it on at least some villa-sites. That christianity had, by or in the last third of the fourth century, become the dominant religion in Roman Britain seems a credible deduction from the material record. By the end of the century we no longer have evidence for other oriental mystery-cults or for traditional Roman religion in Britain. Native British paganism remains the most uncertain factor in the situation, however.

Roman central-government rule in Britain ended during the first decade of the fifth century. It did so in a confused welter of different forces opposed to one another:

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24) G. R. Watson, 'Christianity in the Roman army in Britain', in Christianity, edd. Barley & Hanson, pp. 51—4; Thomas, Christianity, pp. 26—9, 97—9, 266 (cf. 265).
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military usurpation,26l Germanic invasion, and bacaudic revolution. Nevertheless, the character of lowland British life, at least, does not seem to have begun to change radically or irreversibly until the middle years of the century. The testimony (such as it is) of Constantius's Vita Sancti Germani,27 written in Gaul late in the fifth century, presents a picture of civil normality at the time of Bishop Germanus's visits in 429 and (?)435. At the beginning of the fifth century, British christianity was poised on the edge of two major developments, the conquest of the countryside and the export of the religion into areas of Britain beyond the Roman frontier. The visit of Victricius of Rouen is a pointer to the first, for this disciple of St Martin was responsible for carrying christianity to the countryside of that part of Gaul which would in the tenth century become Normandy.28 And if there is any substance to the legend of Bishop Nynia (St Ninian) as a missionary to the Picts, from among the Britons living north of the Roman frontier,29 an archaeological context exists for which merely a precise chronology is needed.30

The development of christianity in Britain seems to present a number of contrasts to the process in Gaul. It might be argued that the much smaller area of Roman Britain and its geographically insular character resulted in a degree of social homogeneity which allowed christianity, once it began to prove acceptable to the Britons, a more rapid diffusion and reception. That it is at present difficult to see rural Romano-British christianity may not (given the nature of archaeological discovery) be determinative of its non-existence or radical weakness, however. And it remains a question whether the pagenses who gave their name to the Welsh kingdom of Powys (and to some other Powyses as well) did so as pagans or merely as countrypeople:31 that they did so before the fifth century is unlikely. In northwestern Gaul, the process of evangelising the countryside was only beginning in the late fourth century and the fifth, as an aspect of the work of Martin and his disciples. Christianity was for a long time to remain an essentially urban phenomenon in that region. If, therefore, Gaul is to provide both a model for and a chronological drag on our perception of the development of British rural christianity, we shall not expect to see extensive reception of the religion even in the

25) See Thompson, Saint Germanus, for what follows.
26) C. E. Stevens, 'Marcus, Gratian, Constantine', Athenaeum (Pavia) 45 [new series, 35] (1957) 316-47.
27) Dekkers & Gaar, Clavis, no. 2105. Cf. Thompson, Saint Germanus; Wood, 'The end'.
29) Thomas, Christianity, pp.275--94.
30) Ibid., pp.235--6; A. C. Thomas, 'The evidence from North Britain', in Christianity, edd. Barley & Hanson, pp.95--121, at 106--8, 120 (nn.69--70).
fifth century.

The cataclysm which was to affect Britain after the middle of the fifth century provides us with some evidence for the extent of rural Christianity at that time. British Christianity was largely obliterated from what would now become southern, eastern, and parts of midland and northern England by the process of Anglo-Saxon conquest and settlement. In English toponymy we see a few petrified traces of a Brittonic word derivative of Latin *ecclesia* which presumably entailed recognition of a British church, cult-site, or—more tendentiously and less tangibly—a British Christian population.\(^{32}\) These places are not all known to have been Roman-period or sub-Roman urban or quasi-urban settlements. Secondly, the migrations to Gaul, and in particular Brittany, which Germanic immigration into Britain seems to have provoked, have been argued on a variety of grounds to have comprised a Christian or partly Christian population\(^{33}\)—in so far as these migrants came from southern Britain we have again some measure of the spread of Christianity in the British countryside.

The fifth-century collapse of urban life in much of Britain and the great loss of territory to the English required a readjustment on the part of the British Church.\(^{34}\) Whether a process of reorganisation or rationalisation was ever consciously carried through is unknown and may be doubted. As British political life fragmented (and with it the Roman administrative infrastructure), as the area of Britain under native control shrank towards the north and west, and as the problems of dealing with whatever refugees managed physically to escape English invasion and conquest increased, so the difficulty of maintaining a version of the pre-existing ecclesiastical structure would have intensified. Whether refugees from south and east were responsible for advancing Christianity in northern and western Britain is quite unknown. Nevertheless, by the end of the fifth century we have tangible evidence, in the form of inscribed stone monuments, of the spread of Christianity to all corners of British-speaking Britain.\(^{35}\) We can also be certain, on the evidence of long-cist cemeteries, that it had successfully passed across into part of southern Pictland.\(^{36}\) By the time when Gildas was writing, in the mid-sixth century (and if Welsh poetry attributed to the sixth-century poets Aneirin and Taliesin is to be admitted as evidence), we have no hint of any British religion other than Christianity.\(^{37}\)

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32) K. Cameron, 'Eccles in English place-names', in *Christianity*, edd. Barley & Hanson, pp. 87–92; cf. Thomas, *Christianity*, pp. 147–9, 262–5.
36) See above, n. 30.
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The full development of British rural Christianity may therefore have been coincident with the radical contraction of the extent of Britain still held by the native population.\(^{39}\) That the full ecclesiastical hierarchy continued to exist in Britain is certain, on Gildas's evidence,\(^{40}\) but that its detailed relationship to territory, administration, and pastoral care remained the same cannot be vouched for. A theory advanced in 1950, that the visible emergence of Christianity in fifth-century Wales and southwestern Britain, regions both predominantly rural in character, was due to missionary activity directed from Gaul, has been largely ignored, other reasons for the connexions with Gaul made apparent by the inscriptive memorial formula being preferred, if scarcely verbalised.\(^{40}\) Nevertheless, the coincidence of the emergence of such tangible evidence for Christianity in rural western Britain with the collapse of the British position in the east must be noted.\(^{41}\) We may suppose that the structures and perceptions of British Christianity were becoming ripe for change as the fifth century lurched towards its close.

To what extent did British Christianity comprehend a monastic element at this date? The only British clues reside in the visit of St Martin's disciple, Victricius of Rouen, to Britain and in the ascetic character of Pelagius's movement.\(^{42}\) Otherwise we have no direct and incontrovertible British evidence that monasticism found any favour there in the fifth century. If the origins of monasticism in Britain are to be placed in that period, they remain obscure. The early history of Insular monasticism was for long a subject of considerable debate and speculation, but in the last generation has ceased to be an issue attracting scholarly attention. It may therefore be deemed ripe for reconsideration.

The literary output of two Britons provides the fuel for our journey. We must nevertheless approach the British situation obliquely. For our first witness is St Patrick, a Briton but one writing in Ireland in the fifth century.\(^{43}\) The initial establishment of

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38) However, Breton evidence might be held to contradict this view: cf. n. 33, above.


41) In all this, North Britain must not be forgotten: cf. *Corpus*, ed. Macalister, II; and see nn. 29–30, above.


43) Dumville et al., *Saint Patrick*, for recent commentary (for text and translation of St Patrick's works, see below, n. 49).
a bishopric to serve a Christian population in Ireland was the initiative of Pope Celestine I who in 431 despatched Palladius to occupy that office. Thereafter—and how long after remains uncertain and controversial—election to an Irish bishopric seems to have passed into the hands of British churchmen: Patrick was, at the earliest, the second appointment made by them; his apostolic understanding of his mission was to earn him an eternal place in Irish ecclesiastical history. Although his death-date has been much disputed, it seems likely to have occurred in or around 493.

Until the early 1960s there had been much debate about the role which monasticism occupied in Patrick's life. Those scholars who cared to rely on the seventh-century and later hagiography for details of Patrick's ecclesiastical education thought him to have been trained as a monk in Gaul and perhaps even Italy. The question was therefore put to his own works, the Confessio or 'Declaration' and Contra Coroticum or 'Against Coroticus', whether they showed in their language and thought that Patrick himself had been trained as a monk or in a centre of Gaulish monastic life. In 1961 a definitive answer was provided in the negative. But the wrong question had been asked. These non-contemporary hagiographies are distant in every way from the life of the historical Bishop Patrick: his own works offer no overt support to the legend of his long sojourn in Gaul, and we have already noted the absence of linguistic or literary evidence for the same. Indeed, it almost seems as if discussion of whether, when, or where St Patrick lived in Gaul diverted attention from what he did have to say about monasticism. It is agreed that there is no evidence that Patrick was himself a monk. But it is easy to take a step beyond that simple statement.

We gain a hint of the nature of Patrick's evidence from §49 of his Confessio:

Nam etsi imperitus sum in omnibus, tamen conatus sum quippiam servare me etiam et fratribus christianis et uirginibus Christi et mulieribus religiosis...

For although I am entirely untalented, I have done my best to safeguard myself,

45) See the discussion by E. A. Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick?* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press 1985), pp.66—78.
47) For consideration of the source-material, see *ibid.*, pp.29—57.
48) This was essentially the position maintained by Ludwig Bäler, *The Life and Legend of St. Patrick. Problems of Modern Scholarship* (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds 1949), and *St Patrick and the Coming of Christianity* (Dublin: Gill 1967).
51) Quotations are taken from Hood's edition (n.49), with minor alterations.
even in my dealings with christian brethren and virgins of Christ and with pious women...

Even if the *fratres christiani* here were not monks, it is hard to see the *uirgines Christi* as other than nuns. The picture becomes clear in §§41—42 of the same work.

Unde autem Hiberione qui numquam notitiem Dei habuerunt, nisi idola et immunda usque nunc semper coluerunt, quomodo nuper facta est plebs Domini et filii Dei nuncupantur, filii Scottorum et filiae regulorum monachi et virgines Christi esse uidentur?

Et etiam una benedicta Scotta genetiua nobilis pulcherrima adulta erat, quam ego baptizavi; et post paucos dies unam causam uenit ad nos, insinuavit nobis responsum accipisse a nuntio Dei et monuit eam ut esset uirgo Christi et ipsa et Deo proximaret. Deo gratias, sexta ab hac die optime et audissime arripuit illud quod etiam omnes uirgines Dei ita hoc faciunt...

‘And how has it lately come about in Ireland that those who never had any knowledge of God but up till now always worshipped idols and abominations are now called the people of the Lord and the sons of God, and sons and daughters of Irish underkings are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ?

‘And there was also a blessed lady of native Irish birth and high rank, very beautiful and grown up, whom I baptised; and a few days later she found some reason to come to us and indicated that she had received a message from an angel of God, and the angel had urged her too to become a virgin of Christ and to draw near to God. Thanks be to God, six days later she most commendably and enthusiastically took up that same course which all virgins of God also do...’

Here we have the clearest evidence for Patrick’s support for both male and female monasticism. Before the end of the fifth century, therefore, this British missionary bishop was introducing some of his Irish converts to the monastic life. Whether or not he was the first to encourage it in Ireland, we must suppose that he became familiar with theory and practice of monasticism during his ecclesiastical training in Britain.

By this circuitous route, therefore, we may deduce that male and female monasticism had


53) But M. Herren, ‘Mission and monasticism in the Confessio of Patrick’, in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*, edd. Donnchadh Ó Corráin et al. (Maynooth: An Sagart 1989), pp.76—85, has managed to avoid drawing this conclusion.
developed in Britain not later than the middle decades of the fifth century. Its sources remain to be determined.

For direct evidence of British monasticism, however, we must turn to a rather later author, Gildas, whose works provide the crucial testimony which enables us to see Insular monasticism at the decisive turning point in its early history. Although Gildas is probably to be taken as a Briton, the evidence is cumulative and inferential rather than overt and decisive. Nonetheless, his life seems to have been spent in Britain and he in due course appointed himself as the prophet who sought to call the Britons to amendment of their lives before divine-inspired genocide overtook them. Gildas wrote his magnum opus in a learned Latin of considerable stylistic complexity. Comparison with Late Latin authors writing on the European continent has suggested to some scholars in recent years that Gildas's conventional life-span of ca 500—570 should be reassigned partly or wholly to the fifth century: such redatings depend, however, on questionable—indeed, in my view, mistaken—assumptions about the parallel development of British and Continental history in the fifth and sixth centuries. For the present purpose, therefore, I accept the received chronology of Gildas's life and literary oeuvre: as will become apparent, there seem to be good reasons for accepting that he played an important role in Insular affairs from the 540s to the 560s.

Gildas is best known for a very substantial work De excidio Britanniae, 'The Ruin of Britain'. This is a text of great passion and argumentative power whose message is about moral corruption and consequent genocide; although Gildas described this large work as an admonituncula, 'a modest warning', it is in fact a vigorous call for dramatic reform in Church and State. Built on a thundering series of denunciations of all aspects of public life, 'The Ruin of Britain' was an attempt, by holding up a mirror to the Britons and warning of disaster consequent upon the rottenness of their culture of immorality, to promote a revolution in British life. Gildas was careful, however, to avoid calls for political upheaval: even in his most vigorous denunciations of individual rulers, Gildas pleaded that personal reform was the essential first step to salvation for the Britons as

55) The evidence was provided by Lapidge, 'Gildas's education'; for development, see Wood, 'The end', and M. W. Herren, 'Gildas and early British monasticism', in Britain 400—600: Language and History, edd. Alfred Bammesberger & A. Wollmann (Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1990), pp. 65—78.
57) For editions, see above, n. 21.
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De excidio Britanniae is organised in a preface (§1), a first book containing a summary history of Britain to the author’s own day, concentrating on British fickleness and turpitude (§§2—26), a second book denouncing the secular rulers of Gildas’s day (§§27—65), and a third book directed against his clerical contemporaries (§§66—110). At the end of each of the three books, Gildas referred to an élite-group within the Church, in which he put his own trust for a happier future for British morals. Here is the ending of Book I.

[§26] At illis decedentibus cum successisset aetas tempestatis illius nescia et praesentis tantum serenitatis experta, ita cuncta uestigia ac iustitiae moderamina concussa ac subueras sunt ut earum non dicam uestigium sed ne monimentum quidem in supradictis propemodum ordinibus appareat, exceptis paucis et ualde paucis qui ob amissionem tante multitudinis, quae cotidie prona ruit ad tartara, tam breuis numerus habentur ut eos quodammodo uenerabilis mater ecclesia in suo sinu recumbentes non uideat, quos solos ueros filios habet. Quorum ne quis me egregiam uitam omnibus admirabilem Deoque amabilem carpere putet, quibus nostra infirmitas in sacris orationibus ut non penitus conlabatur quasi columnis quibusdam ac fulcris saluberrimis sustentatur. . .

‘But they died; and an age succeeded them which is ignorant of that storm and has experience only of the calm of the present. All the controls of truth and justice have been shaken and overthrown, leaving no trace, not even a memory, among the orders which I have mentioned: with the exception of a few, a very few. A great multitude has been lost, as people daily rush headlong to hell; and the rest are counted so small a number that, as they lie in her lap, holy mother Church in a sense does not see them, although they are the only true sons whom she has. By their holy prayers they support my weakness from total collapse, like posts and columns of salvation; and no one should suppose that I am carping at their worthy lives, which all men admire and which God loves. . .’

Here now is the end of Book II.

[§65] Quam enim libenter hoc in loco ac si marinis fluctibus iactatus et in optato euectus portu remis, si non tantos talesque malitiae episcoporum ueste ceterorum sacerdotsu aut clericorum in nostro quoque ordine erigi adversus Deum uidissem montes, quos me secundum legem, ceu testes, primum duris uerborum cautibus, dein populum si tamen sanctionibus inhaeret, non ut corporaliter interficiantur, sed mortui utilis eius ueritatis arguan Deo ne personaram arguan exceptionis, totis necesse est uiribus lapidare uerecundia interueniente quiescerem. Sed mihi queso, ut iam in superioribus dixi, ab his ueniam imperitiri quorum utam non solum laudo uerum etiam cunctis mundi
opibus praefero, cuiusque me, si fieri possit, ante mortis diem esse aliquamdiu participem opto et sitio.

'How glad I should be to let modesty step in and to rest here, like one long tossed on the sea-waves and at last carried by his oars to the longed-for haven: if I did not see such great mountains of wickedness raised against God by bishops and other priests and clerics of my order also. These persons must be stoned with hard word-rocks—for I do not wish to be accused of making exceptions of persons,—first by me, as the Law enjoined on the witnesses, then by the people, if indeed they cleave to the decrees: stoned with all our might, not that they may be killed in the body, but that they may die in their sins and live in God. But, as I have said earlier, I beg to be forgiven by those whose life I praise and indeed prefer to all the riches of the world. If it may be so, I desire and thirst to be a participant in that life for a time before I die.'

Finally, here is the conclusion of Book III.

[§110] Ipse omnipotens Deus totius consolationis et misericordiae paucissimos bonos pastores conseruet ab omni malo et municipes faciat subacto communi hoste ciuitatis Hierusalem caelestis, hoc est, sancrorum omnium congregationis, Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus, cui sit honor et gloria in saecula saeculorum, amen.

'May the almighty God of all consolation and pity preserve the very few good shepherds from all harm, and, conquering the common enemy, make them citizens of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, that is, of the congregation of all the saints: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom be honour and glory for ever and ever, amen.'

Thus ends Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae*. From these parallel statements we are able to draw some conclusions about the author's place and affiliations within British ecclesiastical life and about the identity or identities of the few whom he recognised as moral and praiseworthy. It is also possible to see that, as Gildas closed his preface, he was foreshadowing the message which he made somewhat more precise at the end of each book of his treatise.

[§1] In zelo igitur domus Domini sacrae legis seu cogitatucess rationibus uel fratrum religiosis precibus coactus nunc persoluo debitum multo tempore antea exactum, uile quidem, sed fidele, ut puto, et amicale quibusque egregiiis Christi tironibus, graue uero et importabile apostatis insipientibus. Quorum priores, ni fallor, cum lacrimis forte quae ex Dei caritate profuunt, alii autem cum tristitia, sed quae de indignatione et pusillanimitate deprehensae conscientiae extorquetur, illud excipient.
'Therefore, in zeal for the sacred law of the house of the Lord, spurred on by my own thoughts and the devout prayers of my brethren, I now pay the debt so long ago incurred: a poor payment, doubtless, but, as I think, true to the Faith and well intentioned towards every noble soldier of Christ, though burdensome and insupportable for foolish rebels. The former will receive it, if I am not mistaken, with the tears which flow from the charity of God, but the others with sadness—the sadness wrung from the indignation and faintheartedness attending a pricked conscience.'

Gildas's apparent confidence in the effect of his work may have been more justified than he might have thought prudent to anticipate, as we shall see.60) 'Every noble soldier of Christ' constituted, in Britain at least, a small group of the elect, according to Gildas. But he also had *fratres* by whose *religiosiss precibus* the circulation and reception of the work were to be encouraged. More practically, we must suppose that if his work were to have any impact he would have needed the services of a scriptorium to multiply copies in some numbers. Whether such a scriptorium must have been ecclesiastical in Gildas's Britain remains quite unknown.61)

It may be argued that Gildas had two groups of *egregii Christi tirones* (§1) in mind. On the one hand there were those who were *pastores*, who were brethren of Gildas the deacon (for such is the conclusion to be drawn from his identification of his own *ordo*),62) and whom we must therefore suppose to have belonged to the ranks of the secular clergy. They were *paucissimi* (§110), 'very few'. But there was another group, it seems, for Gildas tells us in §65 of 'those whose life I praise and indeed prefer to all the riches of the world. If it may be so, I desire and thirst to be a participant in that life for a time before I die.' Since he was already a cleric, and since it is hard to imagine that he was saying that he desired and thirsted to participate in the life of the good shepherd for a time before his death, it is consequently difficult to avoid the conclusion that he was referring to the monastic vocation. Together the good pastors and the monks were still *pauci et ualde pauci* (§26), 'few, a very few', a phrase which in context was probably intended to include a handful of upright laypeople as well.

The deduction that one of Gildas's small groups of the righteous, that which he hoped to join, was monastic is encouraged by what we can learn of Gildas's subsequent career. The starting point should perhaps be the notice of his death which is found in the 'Annals of Ulster' for A.D. 570.63) Its presence in other Irish chronicles guarantees that

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60) See below, pp. 103—4.
61) Cf. Lapidge, 'Gildas's education'.
it was in the underlying (but lost) 'Chronicle of Ireland' in the early years of the tenth century. Since the roots of visible Irish chronicling reach back to the very middle of the sixth century, there can be no objection of principle to the possibility that Gildas's recorded obit derives from 570 itself; on the other hand, there is nothing in that two-word entry to guarantee its contemporaneity with the event. If the conventional date of publication of De excidio Britanniae, ca 540, is even approximately accurate, Gildas had on this evidence up to thirty years of life ahead of him. Our other testimonies to his activities enable us to understand something of what happened to him in these mid-century decades.

Two further textual sources are credibly associated with the name of Gildas. One is a possibly complete work, the other a series of excerpts. The continuous text survives in two Breton manuscripts of the ninth and tenth centuries, in association with other works of British origin: in the manuscripts it is titled Praefatio Gildae de Poenitentia. The force of the word praefatio is not clear: whether this short text once introduced a longer work or rather represents a preliminary statement on the subject remains uncertain. What is clear is that this is a monastic work: it is not a rule of life, as has sometimes been said, but is an early, perhaps the earliest, example of a penitential, a class of text which was to become a significant regulatory instrument in the Insular Churches, and more generally in western Europe, in succeeding centuries. The only other comparably early penitential is that of Uinniau, an interesting fact in view of his known connexion with Gildas, to which I shall turn shortly.

For Gildas to have written such a work, he must be assumed to have had authority within a monastery. While it is not an indefeasible conclusion that he was an abbot, that would probably be the simplest explanation of his authorship of the Penitential. Gildas came to be seen as an expert on monasticism: here is evidence which helps to

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64) On that work see Kathryn Grabowski & D. Dumville, Chronicles and Annals of Medieval Ireland and Wales: the Clonmacnoise-group Texts (Woodbridge: Boydell Press 1984).
67) See Herren, 'Gildas and early British monasticism', for the most recent discussion. He has concluded that the author of the Praefatio was not Gildas, but his reasons do not seem cogent; I shall return in detail to this matter elsewhere.
69) The Irish Penitentials, edd. & transl. Bieler & Binchy, pp. 3-4, 15, 17, 74-95, 242-8; there are significant problems in reconstructing the text - I have a new edition in preparation. Cf. Dekkers & Gaar, Clavis, no. 1881. See below, pp. 100-2.
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explain that status.

His penitential is a document showing a legislator of moderate character. The author envisaged the applicability of his regulations to monasteries of different economic condition but in other respects (albeit with a couple of asides concerning the lay world) the provisions seem to be of a universal character. The organisation of the text seems rather ramshackle: the work is perhaps a collection of judgments. It is noteworthy that Roman measures were still used in the author's (presumably British) world and that he supposed that members of any ecclesiastical grade might be vowed to the monastic life. The monastic rule (regula) is specifically referred to at the end of the work and might have provided an opening to a copy of Gildas's monastic decreta.

The reader of De excidio Britanniae will smile at of the Penitential: 'Pro bonis regibus sacra debemus offerre, pro malis nequaquam', 'For good kings we ought to offer the sacrifice, for bad ones on no account'. But we should probably be mistaken to think that Gildas had mellowed: it seems that circumstances had changed.

The other writing associated with Gildas is found as a series of dicta attributed to him in Collectio canonum hibernensis, that substantial systematic Hiberno-Latin canon-law text usually attributed to the early eighth century. Here is clear evidence that Gildas had acquired the status of an auctoritas in Insular ecclesiastical circles. (It was at about the same time that Bede was making the thesis of Gildas's De excidio Britanniae a basis of his own Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum.) Of the ten quotations attributed to him, four (nos 2, 3, 4, 5) are concerned directly with the monastic life while two others (nos 6 and 7) involve the question of bishops and abbots as judges. The remaining two substantial items contain very moderate statements about religious interaction with the secular powers (nos 1 and 9). Finally, there are two brief gnomic

70) Gildas, Praefatio de poenitentia, §22.
71) §§3, 6.
72) §§1—2.
73) §§4—7.
74) §27.
76) Sharpe, 'Gildas as a Father of the Church'.
utterances (nos 8 and 10). The third *dictum* is attributed to *Gildas in epistolis suis*: in consequence scholars have attributed all these quotations to a letter or letters of Gildas.

A context for such epistolary activity is provided by a letter to Pope Gregory the Great from the Irish exile-abbot, Columbanus of Bangor (ob. 615). In Letter I, perhaps written in 600, Columbanus was discussing sixth-century Insular enthusiasm for the monastic life. He noted that one Uinniau, *auctor*, had consulted Gildas, also described as *auctor*, and *elegantissime ille rescripsit*, 'he wrote back in a polished style'. Certainly the principal quotations from Gildas in the *Hibernensis* meet that stylistic description. A theory has therefore been powerfully advanced that these quotations all derive from that letter. This must remain uncertain, given that not all obviously concern the subject described by Columbanus. Nevertheless, it seems exceedingly likely that at least nos 2—5 come from the letter of Gildas to Uinniau.

Columbanus had observed that it was the explosion of enthusiasm for the monastic life, and the problems occasioned by that eruption, which had caused Uinniau to consult Gildas. Columbanus wrote of a previous generation. In his own time matters had developed still further in the same direction and the problems had become yet more pressing. He was particularly keen to have Pope Gregory's opinion on the matter.

Tertio interrogationis loco responde adhuc, quaes, si non molestum est, quid faciendum est de monachis illis qui pro Dei intuitu et vitae perfectioris desiderio accensi, contra uota uenientes primae conversionis loca relinquunt et inuitis abbatibus, fereore monachorum cogente, aut laxantur aut ad deserta fugiunt. Uennianus auctor Gildam de his interrogavit, et elegantissime ille rescripsit; sed tamen discendi studio semper maior metus accrescit.

'In the third part of my inquiry, please tell me now, if it is not troublesome, what is to be done about those monks who, for the sake of God and inflamed by the desire for a more perfect life, impugn their vows, leave the places of their first profession, and against their abbots' will, impelled by monastic fervour, either relapse or flee to the deserts. Uinniau the writer questioned Gildas about them, and he sent a most polished reply; but yet, through the zeal for learning, anxiety grows ever greater.'

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Gildas's epistolary fragments provide extraordinary information for us about Insular monasticism in the mid-sixth century. What emerges with the greatest clarity is the variety of the monastic life known to Gildas. This ranged from the lax and sinful to the radically ascetic. What Uinniau and Columbanus were most exercised about was the circumstance in which a monk would abandon his community in search of another in which a more ascetic régime obtained. While dealing with this matter, Gildas had a broader target in his sights. The full force of his controversialist rhetoric we find biting into those members of the monastic movement whom he considered to have succumbed to pride:84 these were not the sleek monks of well-to-do houses but the extreme ascetics — those who practised excessive abstinence from food, who would not travel in carriages or on horseback, and who in consequence thought themselves superior to those who lived a less austere monastic life. Gildas had emerged as militantly moderate in his views on monasticism and asceticism.

There is little room for doubt in all this that, by the time when Gildas wrote his *Praefatio de poenitentia*, he had achieved his ambition of joining the monastic life: indeed he had quite probably become an abbot, and the means of doing so in the sixth century may have been by founding one's own monastery. Although there is no basis for placing the *Praefatio* before or after the time of writing of the letter to Uinniau,85 we can say that, when Uinniau consulted him, Gildas must already have been a person of some consequence in the monastic movement.

More than this, the nature of Uinniau's enquiry itself indicates that monasticism had taken a major leap forward from the circumstances envisaged in Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae*. In that work, as we have seen, Gildas referred to the monks of Britain as being very few in number. Nevertheless, in his account of the sacriligious assassination of two royal youths by Constantine, king of Dumnonia, Gildas introduced an abbot into the story.86 More remarkably still, his evidence reveals that Maglocunus of Gwynedd, according to Gildas the most powerful British king in his day, had become a student of monastic rules (*decreta monachorum*) and, as a result, had taken *monachi uotum*: addressing him directly (after Maglocunus had recanted) Gildas accusingly reminded him that *monachum perpetuo uouisti*.87 Monasticism was therefore clearly functioning in

85) No attempt has been made to measure the progression of Gildas's literary style: given the generic difference, it is inevitable that *Praefatio de poenitentia* is quite different in style from the epistolary works (for the *De excidio* as a letter, see the Preface, [I.1], 1) and cannot be compared thus with them.
86) *De excidio Britanniae*, II.28, 1—2.
Britain in Gildas’s thirties and forties and even had the power to attract, however ephemerally, an outstanding royal recruit. Nevertheless, the situation of monasticism was transformed within the next decade or two.

To find out what was happening, we must first ask some questions about Gildas’s correspondent, Uinniau. His identity and origins have in recent years become a matter of controversy. To my mind, his name is explicable only in terms of Brittonic philology: that he was a correspondent of Gildas should therefore occasion no surprise. However, if—as seems quite likely—he is to be identified with one or all of the Irish SS. Finnian, then he was probably a British missionary cleric working in Ireland in the mid-sixth century. All the indications are that he was at the climax of his career, a bishop and a famous teacher associated with the monastic movement, in the 530s and 540s. There is accordingly some likelihood that he was in Ireland when he wrote his famous, but no longer extant, letter to Gildas. His Penitential survives in rather different forms in two ninth-century manuscripts and has proved difficult to reconstruct in detail. As I mentioned above, it may have been an originating text of this genre or may itself have originated in interaction with Gildas. In its transmission, it is effectively a Hiberno-Latin work.

What these deductions about Uinniau’s career suggest is that it is an open question where the problem had first arisen about which he corresponded with Gildas. We have already observed that St Patrick’s Confessio provides evidence that that British missionary bishop in Ireland had encouraged monasticism. It is not inconceivable that, in the context of evangelisation, monasticism prospered more in Ireland than it did at home in Britain. This question was debated to a standstill achieved in the 1960s, and not on good evidence. It must still be asked, however. Nevertheless, we may be certain that a similar enthusiasm for the monastic life developed in Britain during Gildas’s mature years. What he had to say by way of controversy makes it clear that the variety of monastic practice, arising from the popularity of the form, was a current problem for him. Only in one circumstance could this conclusion be overturned: if Gildas had relocated to the

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90) See p. 98.
91) For the manuscripts, see above, nn. 69, 89.
92) See above, pp. 91—4.
Irish mission-field in the latter part of his career. The same thought is certainly present in
the work of eleventh- to thirteenth-century hagiographers of Gildas:94) at present we have
no way of knowing whether such a possibility represents fact, deduction, or fantasy.

What had happened in the Insular Churches which was exercising the pens of
monastic authors in the middle and second half of the sixth century? It seems plain
that from the mid-century there had been an explosion of enthusiasm for the monastic
life in Celtic Britain and in Ireland on a scale, and with a variety, which would not be
seen again until the new rise of monasticism in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.
This development, which may have caught ecclesiastical and even monastic leaders by
surprise, brought an assortment of problems of Church-order in its wake. It was not a
phenomenon of a single generation, for Columbanus at the end of the century was to
refer to the enthusiasm continuing to grow.95) Already in Gildas's day the evidence
resided in the great variety of contemporary interpretations of monasticism.

The first cause which one might hypothesise is Gildas's own De excidio Britanniae.
While it must be admitted that the direct audience for that complex and stylistically
difficult text is likely to have been relatively small, a secondary audience receiving the
essentials of his message through preaching might have been large indeed. That members
of the British secular elite could be fascinated by monasticism is made plain by the case of
King Maglocunus.96) From fifth-century Ireland we have Bishop Patrick's evidence of
royal adherents to the monastic life.97) The impact of the De excidio on ecclesiastics is
even more difficult to gauge, but it is important not to rule out the possibility that
there was a widespread response to his call for moral reform. We do not need to suppose
that the first response was a rush to embrace monasticism. If, however, there were many
who sought to amend their lives, then they may soon enough have come to see
monasticism as a practical means of achieving their aim.

To turn to the monastic life can also be a negative reaction to society. Here again,
Gildas may have had an impact. But he also warned that, if reform was not achieved,
dire consequences would face the Britons. His heavily loaded account of Britain's history,
given in Book I of De excidio,98) showed that plague and conquest by foreigners were
prices which the Britons had paid for their sins in previous generations. In the sixth
century Germanic settlers in Britain were an ever-present threat: the pace of Anglo-Saxon
conquest seems to have increased again from mid-century, but the chronology of this
development is not precise. On the other hand, we can be quite certain that plague did
reach Britain by the end of the 540s: the so-called 'Justinianic Plague' which traversed

94) For texts, see Gildas, ed. & transl. Williams, pp. 315—413.
95) See above, p. 100.
96) See above, pp. 101—2 and n. 87.
97) See above, p. 93.
98) §§ 2—26; § 2 presents a summary and guide.
Europe from the east during the later 530s and the 540s seems to have marked an era in Irish history, as also in historical record, and it is not difficult to credit that it could have constituted a defining moment in British history too.

Taking all these points together, one could hypothesise that Gildas’s written appeal for reform and further oral publication of its contents began to create a mood in favour of moral rearmament in mid-sixth-century Britain. The onset of the ‘Justinianic Plague’ in the later 540s may have seemed to provide divine confirmation of Gildas’s prophetic message and have spurred people towards radical amendment of their outlook. Perhaps there was also flight— which in many particular instances could have acquired a religious character—from the society struck by plague. And if soon thereafter Anglo-Saxon expansion in Britain resumed, Gildas’s message would have seemed doubly vindicated.

A perfect image of the resulting context would be that provided by Bede’s account of the battle of Chester (613–616) in which British forces were aided by a large contingent of monks praying for defeat of the pagan English army: but the result, portrayed by Bede in a Gildasian interpretation, was defeat for the Britons and a slaughter of the monks. It is far from clear that Bede, who wrote more than a century after the event, has given a historical picture; but the image captures well the results of developments in British history in the seven decades or so after the publication of Gildas’s De excidio. Had Gildas been able to interpret the event, he would have deemed reform to be inadequate and perhaps too late. Bede was able to take it as evidence that the Britons, and especially their churchmen, had persisted in the sins which Gildas had denounced.

The era of Insular ecclesiastical history beginning in the sixth century has often been called ‘the Age of the Saints’. Monastic enthusiasm seized the Gaelic world too, and it is clear that explanations which might be appropriate for British society cannot be wholly transferred to Ireland or even to the Irish colonies in Britain. We should perhaps see the development of monasticism in Gaelic society as more closely related to the reception of Christianity itself, while nonetheless enjoying particular popularity from the middle

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100) Bede, Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, II.2.
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quarters of the sixth century.

The 'Age of the Saints', whatever its historical basis, became (though not by that name) a definitional convention in Insular ecclesiastical writing already in the late seventh century and has never been wholly displaced from perceptions of the earliest mediaeval history of the British Isles and Brittany. That this concept embodies an essential historical fact is hard to gainsay. However, a variety of important questions about the interrelationships of christianity and society remains unanswered. The nature of the interaction of evangelisation and monasticism is one. How Church-structures mutated as a result of the growth and development of monasticism is another. Furthermore, we still need to find the sources of inspiration of the Insular monastic movement. In her famous work, The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church, Nora K. Chadwick hypothesised, on the basis of hagiography of very various but uniformly non-contemporary dates, that the Desert-Fathers literature which took its origin in the Near-Eastern well-springs of monasticism in late Antiquity had a crucial role in relation to the origin and development of Insular monasticism. This cannot however be demonstrated, at least in relation to Apophthegmata patrum and related texts: it is not until the late eighth and ninth centuries that their influence in the Celtic-speaking world can credibly be postulated. There are, however, two other possible routes of transmission. We know that monasticism began to acquire a significant presence in parts of Gaul from the late fourth century and that at least the two principal monastic groups there cultivated their own contacts with the desert-monasticism of the Near East. Specific British contacts with these groups may have allowed the transmission of a variety of monastic ideals and practices to the British Isles.

By Gildas's time such transmission can in some measure be defined in literary terms. Recent work has shown that he had read texts by Sulpicius Seuerus and John Cassian, representatives of the two principal schools of monasticism in late Antique Gaul. We have already seen that relationships between these two groups were not good. It may therefore tell us something about the nature of British monasticism, at least in the sixth century, that Gildas felt able to profit from both these streams of Gaulish monastic thought. On the other hand, we may be learning thus how it was that Gildas in particular came to be regarded, both in his own time and by subsequent generations, as an authority on monasticism.

105) See above, pp. 86-7.
107) On that reputation see Sharpe, 'Gildas as a Father of the Church'. Neil Wright, History and Literature in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West. Studies in Intertextuality (Aldershot: Variorum 1995), preface, p. x, thought that 'Gildas's knowledge of the ascetic and
That the ascetic concept of the desert had penetrated Insular monastic thought by the late seventh, and quite possibly by the late sixth, century is clear from the account given by Adomnán of Iona, in his Life of St Columba (written 697–704; the saint died in 597), of the search for ‘a desert in the ocean’ by a determined monastic navigator, Cormac, nepos Léthdáin. The call of non-missionary spiritual exile, often producing a similar effect, is documented from the time of St Columbanus who in 590 had left a senior position in his northern Irish monastery in favour of lifelong pilgrimage with a like-minded company of monks on the European mainland. These radically ascetic manifestations of monastic fervour were to have a long and powerful affect on Gaelic, and more generally on Insular, ecclesiastical life. That extreme manifestations of the call of the desert did not win universal favour among practitioners of monasticism is evident from Gildas’s writing, as also in subsequent centuries.

Nevertheless it is certain that monasticism exercised a powerful and pervasive influence on Insular ecclesiastical life and thought. Not the least manifestation of this is the interpretatio monastica which came to affect presentation of many institutions of Insular, and especially Gaelic, christianity. If it were an exaggeration to say that in Insular Latin usage any church might be called monasterium, the head of any church abbas, and the male ecclesiastical population monachi, it would not be grave hyperbole. That in the Gaelic Churches the tenants of ecclesiastical estates might in Irish be called manaig (Latin monachi) is further testimony to the pervasiveness, but also to local development, of monastic thinking. It was long thought by scholars that the whole character of ecclesiastical life among the Celtic-speaking peoples had become monastic. However, recognition of non-monastic use of monastic terminology in England and elsewhere, and of non-monastic ecclesiastical structures in the Brittonic-speaking countries, has helped to initiate debate about the extent to which Gaelic christianity of the early and monastic writings of [Jerome, Sulpicius Severus, and John Cassian] goes some way towards providing a literary background for his later reputation as an authority on monasticism, a reputation which otherwise does not sit particularly well with the concerns of his tract [De excidio Britanniae]. I hope that I have shown above that there is a connexion between De excidio and monasticism (see pp. 94–104).


110) See above, pp.100–1, and also Giles Constable, Religious Life and Thought (11th-12th Centuries) (London: Variorum 1979), chapters III–IV.

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central middle ages was monastic. That scholarly process has not yet gone very far, and contributors to the discussion seem uncertain whether a wholly monastic Church would have been able to provide appropriate pastoral care for the entire Christian population. It is unlikely that the problem can be resolved simply by the use of Insular evidence: the likelihood is that comparative testimony from other Churches—Greek and Near-Eastern, in particular—and from other religious systems, especially Buddhism, will have to be summoned to offer enlightenment to the historian of the Insular middle ages.


114) Comparative work of this sort is now being undertaken by David H. Gabriel at UCLA.