CHRISTIANITY IN BRITAIN IN ROMAN TIMES, WITH REFERENCE TO RECENT DISCOVERIES AT CANTERBURY.

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THE subject of my paper is one of no small interest in relation to the much discussed subject of the origin of Christianity in our land. It is no less than a notice of what I believe to be the discovery of a portion of a Christian church erected in Roman times.

I propose to describe the discoveries in detail; but before doing so, it may be well to make some introductory remarks upon the subject of such deep moment to us all—the commencement and growth of the Christian faith in our country.

Were we to believe implicitly the so-called writers of Ecclesiastical History, Britain must have been well advanced in Christianity when the Saxons landed on our shores. Alas! that it has to be stated, these records—of later date in almost every case—bear the attendant stamp of the later date. Fact gives place to fiction, and sober history is lost in legends so unreal that we have to pause to consider how much is true and how much the results of the distempered fancies of men living too much alone: whose sense of the marvellous caused sober realities to be set aside; or who believed that they were rendering service to the Church by the exaltation of some dogma or some human authority.

So early a date as the year 150 is assigned, by the

authorities whom Bede follows, for King Lucius' request to Pope Eleutherius to "make him a Christian;" and this is taken as a commencement of Christianity in England. The dates given do not accord; and the existence of King Lucius at all has yet to be proved.

The Diocletian persecution is a known fact; but there are some real reasons for doubting whether or not it ever penetrated into Britain. Nevertheless, more than one chronicler relates the martyrdom of the pious Alban at Verulamium during the Diocletian persecution, "when churches were destroyed and holy men were slaughtered."

Alban suffered with all the surroundings apparently inseparable from a monkish legend. The river Thames dries up at his approach to the place of martyrdom, according to Gildas—although Bede's authorities are content to make the miracle occur at the stream between the city and the hill of execution. A spring bursts forth from the spot. The eyes of the executioner fall out!

St. Joseph of Arimathæa is said to have settled at Glastonbury: St. Paul to have visited Britain. The King of Britain slays with his own hand hundreds of the heathen Saxons at the Battle of Old Bath Hill, his shield being guarded by a statue of the Blessed Virgin!

Thus do the histories of the time, or those written closest to the events, teem with improbabilities, and give reason for the doubt expressed by so close an observer of archæological facts as the late Mr. Thomas Wright, who says, "We seem driven by these circumstances to the unavoidable conclusion that Christianity was not established in Roman Britain;" and again, "Not a trace of Christianity is found among

the innumerable religious and sepulchral monuments of the Roman period found in Britain."*

These are conclusions too hastily arrived at; and antiquaries should ever remember that their facts of to-day may receive fresh additions and illustrations by the discoveries of to-morrow.

The most absurd-sounding of the old legends may contain a germ of truth under its later dress. Strip it of the latter and we obtain the right view of the case. Thus at St. Alban's we find the description of the country—even to the pool of water—agreeing with what we can trace there to-day, while the local belief in the reality of the Proto-Martyr of England is shewn by the continued existence of a costly church on the spot named by tradition as that of the martyrdom.

A battle was fought at Bath Hill, and it is very possible that a British chief or ruler was there.

The legends of St. Paul and of St. Joseph must be taken with all caution, but their remaining as local traditions for so long a period is a very noteworthy fact.

The old historians render evidence, however, of another kind, of greater weight and importance to our inquiry, bearing as it does much of the impress of reality and truth.

St. Athanasius, in the middle of the fourth century, speaks of British Bishops being present at his trial at the Council of Sardis. Three British Bishops are recorded to have been at the Council of Arles A.D. 314. Their names have been subjected to questioning criticism, which if it stood in relation to this event alone would be worthy of all attention. The fact remains that, as soon as history becomes reliable, we find British

* *The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon*, pp. 353, 355.

Bishops actually in existence in various parts of our country. There was, in Cornwall, in all probability, a See independent of Rome, up to the tenth century, when Athelstan, Bishop of Bodmin, was consecrated by Archbishop Plegmond A.D. 904, and the See then became subject to the Saxon Church. We hear of Bishops of the British Church, early in the sixth century, subject to their metropolitan of Caerleon. The foundation of the Cambrian Sees may be lost in obscurity, but the continuance of some of them is a fact to this day. From the fourth to the sixth centuries, when reliable history comes to our aid, is not long; and it is more reasonable of belief that the Bishoprics in existence at the latter date were the continuance of foundations of an earlier period, than that they were unrecorded foundations of the later time.

Statements by reliable and contemporary authors, rather than those of later date, may also be appealed to, in a few passages which I will rapidly glance at. Origen, in the third century, asks, in his fourth Homily on Ezekiel, "When before the advent of Christ did the land of Britain agree in the worship of one God?" Tertullian's well-known statement, "The parts of Britain inaccessible to the Romans are subdued by the truth of Christ," bears the stamp of true history, and is in harmony with the archæological relics.

There is evidence of still another kind in the old histories.

Incidentally we hear of considerable intercourse between the Churches of Armorica, Ireland, Cornwall, Scotland, and the north of England.

We find this as soon as history becomes reliable, and we may readily believe that this, too, was but a con-

tinuance of something older, rather than something of recent occurrence.

The two visits of Germanus, Bishop of Tours, to Britain, the mission of St. Patrick to Ireland, and that of Bishop Palladius to confirm the faith of the Scots,* all point to the existence of Christians in these countries, and at many points of them, and may be accepted as a reason for the existence of such large numbers of British Christians in the sixth and later centuries. We are thus prepared for the congregations in the Banchors of Ireland and Wales, the missions of Columba, and of the Culdees, and for the flourishing Christian Churches, which appear to be separate and distinct from Saxon England.

The existence of Christians at an early date is also shewn by the rise and progress of the Pelagian Heresy. The Church must have possessed a vast number of members for the errors of the time to be so recruited from their midst; and it may be noted that when Germanus strove so ably to refute the evil, we hear of him not at one spot of Britain only, but at Verulamium, at Oxford, and in Wales.

I will now proceed to describe actual relics of early Christian times, that have been revealed through the aid of the science of archæology. It may, however, be readily supposed that the extent of Christianity cannot be judged or measured by these. The decay of time may account for the loss of many: many more may yet be discovered. We may suppose, too, that there may have been many Christians, and but few indications of their presence that could survive to our time. Indeed there may have been but few outward signs even at the time referred to. "Though we have

* The date is given in the *Saxon Chronicle* as 430.

known Christ after the flesh," says St. Paul, "yet now henceforth know we him no more."

This sentiment was doubtless that of the Church for a long period, and it is quite possible, under its influence, for there to be a large and flourishing congregation of Christians with but few tangible evidences of their existence.

So early as the latter part of the last century a Roman villa was discovered at Frampton, Dorsetshire. It was evidently a building once occupied by a wealthy owner, for the pavements were of great beauty. On one of these, filling a small semicircular apse, the Christian monogram was found, worked in mosaics, forming a portion of one of the most elaborate of the pavements; while in another pavement there is a medallion portrait of a man having a mild and amiable expression, which is recognised by some as a portrait of our Blessed Lord.

The Chirho is an early rather than a late symbol used by the Christian Church, and its presence in a wealthy Roman villa is a significant fact. The discovery attracted much attention at the time, but, being an isolated fact, it was doubted or believed to be a later insertion. It had almost passed out of memory, when attention was again called to it by my friend Mr. T. W. Grover in 1867.*

This was followed by the discovery, in 1864, of a Roman villa at Chedworth, in the county of Gloucester, so favoured by the Romans. Here the monogram of Christ was found carved on two of the steps as if to mark the sure foundation of the building. A hexagonal bath, found at the same time, of remark-

* "Pre-Augustinian Christianity in Britain"—*Journal of the Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, 1867, p. 223.

able construction, is believed, and with very weighty reasons, to have been a Baptistry.

Mr. Grover enumerates, among other precious relics of early Christianity, the presence of the sacred monogram on two plates of pewter found in the Thames at Battersea, now in the British Museum; and points to the numerous coins of Constantine having the Labarum, and to those of Magnentius with the Chirho. With so many signs of the Christian faith, then in the ascendant at Imperial Rome, circulating among them, our surprise would be rather if there were no Christians then in our land, instead of at their presence. It can hardly be doubted but that many of these coins were minted in Britain.

In addition to these, there exists at Alnwick Castle a Roman urn of the well-known Caistor ware. It has the sacred monogram laid on in white slip. I am indebted to Mr. Roach Smith for the knowledge of this evidence, and he adds that it is the only object having reference to Roman Christianity known to him.

At a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries, held early in 1882, a remarkable discovery at a Roman villa at Fifehead Neville, Dorsetshire, was reported by Mr. Middleton. Among the excavated remains of the building two silver bracelets were found. On one was the sacred monogram. It occurred again on the other, in slightly different form, with two palm branches, left and right.

I have confined my references to examples that are beyond doubt or question, to the exclusion of many which cannot now be referred to, or which are of doubtful, Gnostic, or of Mithraic import. Apart from these in England, time will admit only of passing reference to the Christian monogram on the tomb of

Carausius at Pen Machno, one of a long series of Christian monuments extending quite into the later Celtic style of the Welsh Church; and to the Scottish series, which has exactly the same sequence.

The Cornish examples go over the same ground, and prove the existence of Christianity from early to late times.

The Rev. S. M. Lach-Szyrma has recently called attention to the presence of a monument with Roman lettering, most probably of Christian origin, in St. Hillary churchyard, close to one of Celtic Christian style, and to others of the early Gothic period, as illustrative of the continuance of a Christian cemetery on the same spot from Roman times to our own day.

I have briefly scanned some of the salient points of the old chroniclers bearing on this subject. There are others in relation to the building of churches, but it may be needful for brevity sake to refer to but three of these.

St. Augustine (A.D. 602), "being supported by the King, recovered, at Canterbury, a church, which he was informed had been built by the ancient Roman Christians, and consecrated it in the name of our holy Saviour, God, and Lord, Jesus Christ, and there established a residence for himself and his successors."*

This is as direct and clear a statement as can well be desired, made by the most judicious of all our ecclesiastical historians—the Venerable Bede—and from records which are carefully noted in the prologue to his book.† "Traces of the assistance which he

* Bede's *Eccles. Hist.*, ed. Bohn, p. 60.

† This has been pointed out in the Preface to the edition published by the Early English Text Society. The quotation is from this Preface.

derived from Canterbury are perceptible in the minute acquaintance which he exhibits not only with the topography of Kent, but with its condition at the time when he wrote." The finding of a probably ruined building on the site of the intended new church could hardly have been an invention, while the fact would have been sufficiently noteworthy to be recorded. We may therefore conclude that the Roman origin of Christ Church, Canterbury, is an historical fact as well made out as any fact of such a remote period can be. The men of that ancient city, the cradle of our faith, so to speak, may well congratulate themselves that the sounding forth of Christianity from the Cathedral, never interrupted from the days of Augustine to our own, had its beginnings at a still earlier date.

East of the Cathedral, in the cemetery of St. Augustine's Abbey, the ruins of St. Pancras Church claim our attention. The history, as related by Thorn, the monk of St. Augustine's, indicates that St. Augustine found there a temple where King Ethelbert was wont to pray, which he changed into a church, dedicating it to St. Pancras. We owe to the zeal of the Reverend Canon Routledge and the painstaking efforts of this Society, very important archæological results on this site. The ruins are those of a Roman building, and so church-like in their plan as to warrant the belief that they formed a portion of a Roman Christian church.

To refer again to the Venerable Bede, and to the passage so well known to us: "There was on the east side of the city a church dedicated to the honour of St. Martin,* built whilst the Romans were still in

* This reference to the dedication of a church is perhaps the oldest one we have in Britain, and it is valuable as shewing the

the island, wherein the Queen, who, as has been said before, was a Christian, used to pray." It is in this church that the recent discovery of Roman masonry has been made, which is the immediate reason of my paper.

The structural records of these three buildings have been referred to so often that I hesitated to bring them forward again. I have done so, however, since they have never been thus grouped together, and my purpose is two-fold. While they indicate the Roman origin of two of the buildings passed in review, and at least a Saxon origin for the third one named, which is now proved to be Roman, they afford us evidence not a little startling of the extent of Christianity in Canterbury in Roman times. Here, in a distance hardly one mile from one site to another, we find evidences of no less than three separate and distinct churches.

I need dwell but briefly on the Rev. Canon Routledge's discoveries at St. Pancras.* The building had a nave 42 feet 6 inches by about 26 feet, and a south transept central with the nave 10 feet 6 inches by 9 feet 6 inches. A tower or porch of exactly the same size at the west end, contained the entrance. An eastern apse opened into the nave, flanked on one

antiquity of the custom, and the retention of the name through all the vicissitudes of the building. It may be referred to also as a reason for our belief that the early names of many other churches are of considerable antiquity. The names of almost all the Cornish and Welsh churches are those of the local Saints or those of the earliest centuries. The frequency of their occurrence is alone no slight evidence of the existence of Christianity in those districts at early times, apart from Saxon influence.

* The record of the excavations at St. Pancras is given, with a Plan, in a paper by the Rev. Canon C. F. Routledge in *Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. XIV., pp. 103-7.

side, where we should look for the impost of the chancel arch, by the base and part of the shaft of a Roman pillar, evidently removed from some other building. The discussion as to the age of the walling has been materially lessened from the fact that the mass of the western wall has been visible above ground for many years, and has always been considered of Roman date. Attention was directed to it by the late Mr. J. Brent, F.S.A., who has often spoken of it to me. It was pointed out to the members of the Royal Archæological Institute as a Roman wall by Mr. J. H. Parker, C.B., than whom no man in England is a better judge, from his acquaintance with brick buildings so common in Rome and so unusual in England. The concrete floor of the church was pronounced to be similar to what is found in Roman villas, by Mr. Roach Smith, F.S.A., long before the church-like plan of the building had been developed. The walls of the church are of brick and flint, and have been altered probably in Saxon times; the large chancel arch had been lessened in width; and another opening was made into the transept. It may be noticed, too, that the western porch or tower, of brick, has a strait joint where it abuts on the western wall of the church; as if the former were later in erection than the latter. Still, minute inspection will shew that the walls of this western tower or porch have been not only plastered but painted in bright purple-red Roman fresco. A part of it is still visible on the older west wall, beside and below the threshold of the Norman western door leading into the church, where it was met with during the recent excavations, having been buried beneath the level of a later floor.

At St. Pancras, an interment of a child was found at the west end, the bones being within a wrapper of lead, on which a somewhat lengthy inscription was scratched. A name occurs, in the dative case, followed by the word "sacrum," "sacred to . . . ." (the drawing seems to read "Gom . . ornuo"). Mr. De Gray Birch thinks that the age of this inscription may be the ninth or tenth century, or earlier; the whole being in a very early Celtic hand. Another interment was also found at the west end, within the tower. The body, laid on the bare earth, was built around with stones nearly to the form of the body. The covering was of slabs of stone chamfered; the direction being east and west, the head being to the west.

Let us now pass to St. Martin's. Few buildings have been more frequently scanned; and probably few in a more superficial manner. The result is that its true evidences have been passed by unrecognised, the popular belief being that the walls are early Norman with a later east end; the flat pilaster buttresses of the nave being considered as conclusive in determining this date. No statement is farther from the fact, for there is nothing whatever of Norman work in the walling except very apparent insertions. We may search in vain for the inner and outer casings filled in with rubble so common in Norman work. There are no small worked quoins with Norman diagonal tooling, no grouted work, and no thick walls such as the Normans always built. On the contrary, the walls at once testify that they are different from those of an ordinary church by their unusual thinness —a characteristic rather of some modern than of ancient churches. They average 1 foot 10 inches only

in thickness.* This dimension must at once attract our attention, for it is very usual in the walls of Roman villas, where we meet with it over and over again. The materials, too, are similar, and resemble what we find in villas, a mass of rather rough walling partly of brick and partly of stone, evidently intended to be plastered originally on both sides, and in the case of the nave of the church, built with sea-shore mortar of such remarkable solidity that although the walls are thin and lofty, yet they have sustained the thrust of the later high-pitched roof of Gothic times without injury, and they still stand solid and sound. I would, however, refer them to a late rather than to an early period of the Roman occupation.

The buttresses at the south-east angle, and the central circular buttress of the nave, are of stone up to a certain height, then of brick. Above this they have been tampered with.† Those of the south-west have disappeared during some rebuilding of early date. One only of the north-west angle buttresses remains, the other has been cut away. It is constructed for the most part of stone from some other Roman building, and roughly cut to fit into its present position. The neatness of the evenly cut beds of earlier date contrasts with the roughness of the later work.

It was within the church that the Rev. Canon Routledge's first discovery was made. His curiosity being excited, he had a portion removed of the

* This agrees fairly well with the thickness of the walls of St. Pancras; which are, in some cases, 2 inches less.

† The angles of St. Pancras have also similar flat pilaster buttresses, but of brick.

modern wall-framing near the south-east angle of the nave. Here, hidden behind it, a portion of the original plastering of the walls was met with in position. It is Roman plastering formed of pounded brick. By his invitation I had an opportunity of inspecting this remarkable evidence of the Roman date of the building. I compared a specimen that I removed from these walls, with another which I had brought but a short time previously from the Roman villa at Wingham. They are identical in texture, and but that I had marked the latter, which is thinner, I should not have been able to distinguish between them. This plastering has been found internally on several portions of the nave walls, both north and south, but not quite up to the west end.*

During a recent visit I found that the south wall of the nave had also been plastered, externally, with mortar of pounded Roman brick, in larger fragments than on the interior, and a portion of it is still firm. Its course may be traced; and this indicates the portions of walling that are original and those that have been rebuilt. It can be traced to the lower part of the central buttress, but not to the upper, and it disappears when near the west end.

The western part of the chancel wall, south side, is wholly of brick; the sea-shore mortar is not so apparent, and the Roman plastering has not been met with either internally or externally. It may therefore prove that this portion, like the brickwork of St. Pancras, is of slightly later date, and that we

* Traces of a blocked north door have since been opened up. It proves to be an insertion of Norman times, with straight jambs of axed Caen stone. It had a semicircular head, the tympanum of which has disappeared. It is 4 feet wide, and about 7 feet high.

have in St. Martin's an example of a church to which a chancel has been added. Whether or not this chancel ended originally in an apse has yet to be proved, the present square east ending being of the thirteenth century and an extension of the original building.

On the south side two curious openings call for remark. One is a square opening 5 feet 6 inches high by 3 feet 4 inches wide, having a massive lintel of greenstone above and an equally solid threshold below.*

To the east of this a small semicircular-arched opening is to be seen, recently revealed by Canon Routledge. This may be, in part, of later date than the former opening, for, while the eastern jamb appears solid and the bricks which compose it range with the others, that on the west side is not so regular, and the arch itself, of thin stones, seems as if it had been inserted in an older wall. There is a fragment of freestone, about $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches high, brought from elsewhere, and built in during some repair, in the west impost. On it are a portion of one line of inscription and traces of a second line. A copy of it has been sent to Mr. W. de Gray Birch, F.S.A., F.R.S.L., who describes it as being "of the ninth or tenth centuries."

* This had been walled up in mediæval times in part, and used apparently as a low side window. Traces of mediæval wall-painting were found on the later splayed jamb on the west side.

Behind the Norman piscina in the nave (see Vol. XIV., p. 110) a rough opening has been found on the external wall, 3 feet 8 inches high and 4 feet wide. It is of later date than the piscina, since the plastered surface of the opening covers the stonework of the latter. It is doubtless the arch shewn in Stuckley's view, and was used probably for a churchyard light. It never had any communication with the church.

The letters OMNIV̄. SEORV̄., representing the words "Omnium Sanctorum," are visible; the [E] square C with line through its back marking contraction, being of the period named. The first line appears to read STÆ for "Sanctæ." The whole may be thus read:—"To the honour of Saint .... (a female) and All Saints." It is too imperfect for critical conjecture.

St. Martin's Church consists of a nave 37 feet 11 inches by 24 feet 9 inches, chancel 39 feet 7 inches by 14 feet 2 inches, a western tower of fourteenth-century date, and a vestry and organ chamber of more or less modern work on the north side of the chancel. In seeing much modern work within the building, we cannot but regret that the golden opportunity afforded by the ordeal of restoration, many years ago, was not taken advantage of for a thorough survey of the fabric.

To conclude. We have at St. Martin's the concurrent testimony of history and of the building, that it is of Roman date. We have also the close analogy of the work with that of St. Pancras, even to the differences of construction there visible. In both buildings alike, the orientation, which is perfect, points to the fact that these two Roman buildings were originally intended to be churches, and that we are not regarding the remains of buildings originally erected for some other destination, used at a later period for sacred worship.

The gratifying nature of this evidence will commend itself to many a lover of our old English antiquities. Probably for no one parish church has more interest been shewn than for the little Church of St. Martin on the hillside overlooking Canterbury, where the site and the surroundings at least have

been recognised justly as the same as when Queen Bertha worshipped here, and St. Augustine commenced his momentous mission. This interest may now be very greatly increased, when weighty archæological reasons are thus rendered to justify our belief that the fabric is actually the same as in their day, and that we have in it, as at St. Pancras, actual remains of a Roman Christian church.

The revealing of traces of two Roman churches when none have been hitherto noticed is a remarkable archæological fact. It is sufficiently gratifying to shew that while we are spending pleasant holiday hours, we are recovering a portion of the lost history of our land. No sooner is the subject noted than its scope enlarges. St. Pancras shews in its eastern apse that this feature was of earlier date than at first we may have been inclined to believe, and that its presence here need not be attributed to any importation either from the Western or the Eastern Churches. I have already spoken of the semicircular apse of the Roman villa at Frampton, a feature of constant occurrence in such buildings, but we owe to Mr. Dowker evidence of its existence on an extended scale.

He opened out the site of the church within the Roman station at Reculver in 1877,* and proved beyond all doubt that the building in all its leading lines is Roman. It had a large eastern apse, a nave and side aisles. Portions of the walls of all are of this early date, and the flooring is so also. In the present condition of our knowledge we must believe that this is a Roman building, a Basilica it may be, for we can hardly believe that in the third or fourth

* See *Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. XII., p. 248.

centuries the centre of a new Roman station would be chosen for the site of a Christian church.

So church-like, however, is the plan that it affords us good evidence that the church-builders did at once follow it as a model in Britain, as we know they did on the Continent, and we may therefore believe that the builders of the apse of St. Pancras had their model at hand.

The plan, too, of the ancient Church of Brixworth, Northants, with its nave arches neatly turned with Roman bricks, and its so-called three periods of Saxon work, is so like in its leading lines to the plan of Reculver as to raise the inquiry in our minds whether or not we may not find there traces of another Roman Christian church.

The thanks of all antiquaries have been well earned by the Reverend Canon Routledge, Church-warden of St. Martin's, for his painstaking researches, which have produced such interesting results.