

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION
IN ROMAN BRITAIN

In the first century B.C. Britain formed part of the Celtic world, which covered a wide area in central and western Europe, and was inhabited by peoples of marked intelligence. Anything but uncouth barbarians, by the time of their conquest at the hands of Rome the Celts had achieved a culture of no mean order. The Celtic peoples were not homogeneous racially, though they had (virtually) a common language and art. There was, however, at least one aspect of their civilisation which does not appear to have been universal amongst them, namely, the religious manifestation known as druidism. This cult has aroused an extraordinary, not to say somewhat undeserved interest in modern times. A voluminous literature has grown up around it, much of it profitless, and it is difficult to arrive at an island of hard facts which may, perhaps, exist in the ocean of romanticism.

The little that is known of the druids is derived from references and passages, largely of a casual nature, in classical authors, of which by far the most valuable is Caesar's description of the system as practised in Gaul.¹ He tells us that the druidic priesthood was held in high veneration. It was these men who officiated at the worship of the gods and supervised the sacrifices. They were the teachers of the young. They made decisions in disputes, such as those concerned with lawsuits or with contested boundaries. If men did not accept their award they were excommunicated, and their neighbours avoided them. The priests were a highly privileged class, organised under a single head elected by his fellows, and exempt from military service and the payment of taxes. They were the custodians of the poetic tradition, knowing great quantities of verse by heart. Their distinctive religious doctrine was the transmigration of souls after death.² The original home of druidism, says Caesar, was Britain, whither pupils in his day still went for training in the duties and beliefs of this religion. The druids were the 'professional men' of the Celts, practising the crafts of priest, lawyer, teacher, and administrator. This is clear from

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CHURCH IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Caesar's account, but we must beware of exaggerating the extent of their learning, which by Roman standards was low.

It is not known whether druidism existed elsewhere than in Gaul and Britain, and its real character in the latter country is uncertain. On the strength of Caesar's account, it may be accepted that it was Britain which saw the origin of this religious system.³ This is not, however, the universal view, and Sir T. D. Kendrick has argued further that the druids, as an organised priesthood, were not a feature of British druidism at all, but only of the Gallic; that there is no satisfactory evidence of a corporation of druids in this country, where druidic worship was conducted probably by kings and tribal chieftains, acting in a priestly capacity; and that the celebrated picture of white-robed priests conducting their rites in great stone circles is a romantic creation, unsupported by concrete evidence. It was Gallic druidism in which the classical writers were apparently interested. In Gaul the druids were undoubtedly a powerful body, politically as well as in the field of religion, until Caesar's time, after which their influence declined. We are told directly of the British druids in only one connection, that of the invasion of Anglesey in A.D. 59, which was described by Tacitus.

There was much that was noble in this religion, such as its encouragement of poetry and its inculcation of the military virtues, but the good was combined with the basest superstition and cruelty. The druids taught that the propitiation of the divine power required the offering of human lives. It was the custom to place criminals alive in huge wicker baskets, made in the shape of images, and set them on fire. Not only the guilty, but sometimes also innocent victims were sacrificed in this way when the supply of criminals ran short. When Boudicca achieved her temporary triumph over the Romans in A.D. 61 she celebrated victory by the offering of human beings. According to Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, the druids had a habit of practising divination from the agonised contortions of the victims whom they stabbed.

The Romans, not a squeamish people, were taken aback by such atrocities. Normally tolerant of strange religions, they acted vigorously against druidism. Suetonius says that the emperor Claudius (41-54) suppressed in Gaul this barbarous religion, which in the time of Augustus had merely been forbidden to Roman citizens.⁴ It is clear that in Gaul, following the Roman conquest, druidism was deprived of its

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN ROMAN BRITAIN

power, and indeed was probably identified in the Roman view with the spirit of national resistance. During the reign of Nero (54–68), Suetonius Paulinus launched a determined assault on the isle of Anglesey across the Menai Strait.⁵ During the battle the druids, who in this affair appear as fanatical dervishes rather than as enlightened leaders, offered sacrifices and raised their hands to heaven, calling down imprecations on the invaders. At first disconcerted, the Roman soldiers then overpowered their opponents, including the priests and the black-robed women who gave frenzied encouragement to the native warriors. The sacred groves were felled and the island garrisoned. The Romans were determined that there should be none of this dangerous religious fanaticism in the province which they were to govern for nearly four centuries.

Pliny, writing c. A.D. 77, has a certain amount to say of druidical ceremonial.⁶ To him it is really a species of magic, practised mainly in Gaul but also in Britain. He informs us that the druids held nothing more sacred than mistletoe and the oak on which it grew. They performed their rites in groves of oak-trees, and wherever mistletoe was discovered on a hard oak, it was cut down with great ceremony by a priest in white vestments bearing a golden sickle. The ceremony included the sacrifice of two white bulls. The mistletoe when given in drink had healing properties, making barren animals fertile, and proving a remedy against poison. The normal places of druidical worship were in fact the woods, and a popular notion of modern times that the megalithic monuments, notably Stonehenge, were the work of druids or normally used by them, is without foundation.⁷

But though druidism, in its most dangerous and revolting aspects, was suppressed, Celtic religion as such survived. Indeed, apart from its strong emphasis on immortality, there seems to have been nothing in the druidical theology to differentiate it from Celtic belief in general. The deities which lay at the heart of Celtic worship were many and various, about forty in number, some of them general Celtic deities known also outside Britain, others tending to assume a local colour. It is this localisation which is the dominant characteristic of Celtic religion in Britain. The archeologist has brought to light the dedications of many divinities, such as Ancasta, a war-goddess, who had an altar at Bitterne, near Southampton.⁸ Many of these Celtic deities were adopted by the Romans, or identified by them with gods of their own. Thus Maponus,⁹ a young god who delighted in music, was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CHURCH IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

identified with Apollo—he has many dedications at the military station of Corbridge and elsewhere in the north. Cocidius¹⁰ was a popular god regarded by the Romans as equivalent to Mars; he is represented in silver plaques discovered at Bewcastle as a fully armed warrior. He was a common object of worship in the military forts of the north and along the Wall.

An interesting example of a Celtic deity who was taken over by the conquerors is Sul,¹¹ tutelary goddess who presided over the medicinal hot springs at Bath. Of purely local origin, she is encountered nowhere else in the Empire. The Romans so highly appreciated her qualities that they gave the name ‘Waters of Sul’ to the place where she was honoured. Aquae Sulis in Romano-British times was never a centre of military or administrative importance, and was indeed quite a small town. But the Romans developed it into a spa which attracted visitors from many quarters, as numerous inscriptions testify. The radioactive waters were genuinely helpful to the rheumatic sufferer. All this was combined or at least parallel with religious devotion, and the temple of the healing goddess became a centre of pilgrimage. The Romans identified Sul with Minerva, their own goddess of healing. The temple at Aquae Sulis was a fine one, constructed along classical lines; there were many altars, and apparently a hierarchy of priests. We know the name of one of the latter, Calpurnius Receptus, whose tombstone has survived.

The second century seems to have been a very fruitful time for Romano-British religion. There are many dedications to Cocidius, and there may also be mentioned (purely by way of example) a temple to two local gods Anociticus and Antenociticus at Benwell, on Hadrian’s Wall near Newcastle.¹² In the following century other gods made their appearance, such as Matunus, to whom a temple was built near Elsdon on the Northumbrian moors, during the reign of Caracalla.

It may be that in the third century the official Roman deities were worshipped more widely than before, as a result of the granting of citizenship to all provincials in 213. The greatest of Roman gods was Jupiter Optimus Maximus, who had many altars in this country, most of them set up by army officers. The cult was largely an official one, practised by military units. Jupiter defied assimilation with any native deity. Only once did he assume a Celtic epithet, that of Tanarus, a thunder-god, which appears on an altar dedicated by a centurion at

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Chester, while on a single known occasion he shared an altar with the native god Cocidius. Other gods, such as Mars, were less aloof, and were frequently equated with British deities. It was Mars, moreover, rather than Juppiter who appealed to the common soldier. Mercury was worshipped for good luck. Minerva was favoured by architects. Vulcan was patron of the smith. The worship of many of these official cults required the services of Roman citizens, acting as *flamines* or high-priests. These deities were mingled or equated with native ones in varying degrees, most commonly in the capitals of the country districts, such as Silchester, where Hercules was equated with a Celtic god Segomo.¹³

Of all subjects of the old Roman deities the soldiers were the most loyal, though their devotion has something of the air of a compulsory church parade. The cult of the *numen* or *numina* of the emperor and his household was popular with the three legions stationed at the fortresses of Caerleon, Chester, and York. The auxiliary regiments, drawn from the provincials, also practised the cult, and the shrine of a regiment would ordinarily contain the statue of the reigning monarch. Vows for the welfare of the emperor and the State were solemnly renewed at the beginning of each year. The soldiers had their official and complementary cults, and on the Wall and elsewhere many dedicated altars survive. At the festival of the Rosaliae the regimental standards, which were customarily kept in chapels for safekeeping, were garlanded with roses, as at Corbridge in Northumberland. The Roman officer stationed on his lonely outpost at Chester or York or on the Wall had a family likeness to his modern British counterpart on the north-west frontier of India. He was brave and conservative, devoted to duty, true to his sovereign, and a staunch supporter of the officially established religion.

The emperor-worship which helped to hold together the diverse Empire for so many centuries was no mere set of sentimental ideas, but a clearly-defined cult. At Colchester (Camulodunum) there was a large and well-equipped temple for the service of the imperial worship, built like the temple at Aquae Sulis along classical lines. It perished in the revolt of Boudicca, queen of the Iceni. It is interesting to notice that though this imperial cult at Colchester was a British one, it had as its object of devotion the emperor. Tribal leaders were elected to serve as priests in turn, paying for festivals and games as part of their service. We find similar groups of priests for the imperial cult at Lincoln and

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England
 John Godfrey
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE CHURCH IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

York, drawn from well-to-do citizens, who as part of their duties were expected to keep in repair such public utility works as bridges and sewers. It was in the service of the imperial cult that the provincials showed their gratitude for the peace and security which Rome had brought them.

One aspect of the cult was the linking up of the worship of the emperor's *numen* with altar and temple dedications. Thus a temple at Chichester (Noviomagus) was dedicated to Neptune and Minerva on behalf of the imperial family. Chichester also had a statue dedicated to Nero. The imperial cult was widespread in Britain, whose inhabitants apparently found it congenial. The *numen* of the emperor could either be worshipped by itself, or, as was frequently the case, in association with gods of various kinds.

There was one department of Roman religion however which seems to have made little appeal to the provincial inhabitants of Britain. This consisted of the Eastern cults, which had a strong hold on many Romans during the closing centuries of the Empire of the West. The influence which they exercised was a personal one, and they fulfilled a need of the human soul which the official deities of the pantheon could not satisfy. They were emotional, and yet in a sense intellectual, offering answers to many perplexing questions. Despite their attractions, however, these cults were practised in Britain only by the soldiers and the more Romanised urban elements of the population.

Such a cult was that of Jupiter Dolichenus, which is known to have existed in this country, and whose oracles were helpful to many. His elaborate worship required an unusual type of temple, containing various compartments. The cult was at its strongest in Britain during the third century. The Egyptian divinities Serapis and Isis also had their devotees, and so had the Asian Cybele, whose worship is suggested by fragments of sculpture at Corbridge. But most important of these cults in Britain was that of Mithras, a god of Zoroastrian origin, who had arrived in Rome during the first century B.C. It was a secret cult, open only to men, and welcomed especially by the soldiers. It offered a unique knowledge of God and union with him, demanding in return a high standard of conduct. Members were introduced to the mysteries by graded stages, and exacting tests were imposed on candidates. It was a difficult religion to follow, and the evidence for Britain suggests that its adherents here were comparatively few in relation to the numbers of those practising other cults. Such Mithraic dedications

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN ROMAN BRITAIN

as we possess are nearly always the work of army officers. The temples are invariably small, designed to accommodate a handful of worshippers. They are all in military areas, with the single known exception in London, which served the needs of merchants. The cult was at its height in the third and early fourth centuries. Temples have been excavated at Housesteads, Rudchester, and in recent years at Carrawburgh,¹⁴ all on Hadrian's Wall. A Persian cult thus reached to the distant confines of the north-west—a remarkable testimony to the mobility of religious ideas possessing sufficient capacity to answer man's deepest needs. The three Wall temples, which were all of course dedicated by soldiers (in two cases by regimental commanders), had their vicissitudes, and the succession of worship was apparently not always maintained. It seems there were times when the number of worshippers on a station would sink to one or two. The Carrawburgh temple came to an end early in the fourth century, when it was destroyed and turned into a rubbish dump, which must surely be the most ignominious fate which could overtake a place of worship. This may well have been the work of a zealous Christian commanding officer, following the Edict of Milan in 313.

The ritual varied at these Mithraic shrines. But Mithras himself was common to them, along with his attendant gods of Light and Darkness. Mithras was a god of the sun, Sol Invictus, who always triumphed over darkness. There is evidence at Carrawburgh and Housesteads for a bull-killing relief, but no indication of a taurobolium or pit in which initiates stood while the blood of a slain bull was poured over them. Mithras himself certainly was a bull-slayer, but the nauseating ceremonies involving baptism in the blood of a bull belonged to the Mysteries of the Phrygian Cybele rather than to Mithraism.

Besides the three temples on Hadrian's Wall, there is other evidence for the existence of the cult, as at Carlisle, Newcastle, Wallsend, and elsewhere. A post-war discovery which aroused wide public interest was the Mithraic temple in London, which seems for the most part to have served the spiritual needs of merchants from the East.

Non-Christian religion during the Romano-British period thus presents a picture of almost bewildering variety. The Celtic form of religion, though under the druids (at any rate in Gaul) powerfully organised, was from a spiritual point of view never more than fragmentary. Numerous unconnected divinities, with diverse attributes and qualities, and with local significance, were scattered over the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CHURCH IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

province in wood and stream and hill. The Roman religion with its Juppiter presiding loftily over the destinies of the State, and its worship of the deified emperors, had a stronger underlying reality and unity. But to a large extent it was an official faith, lacking warmth or depth; to many Romans it must have seemed that its demise could not be long delayed. The rise of the Mysteries indicated the need for a religion essentially more religious. The time was ripe, in Britain as elsewhere, for a new and altogether dynamic religion, which would be close to men's hearts and yet firmly based on the eternal Godhead; which would grapple with the fundamental problems of existence, and offer its adherents an attractive, if stern and exacting, way of life.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTIANITY IN ROMAN AND
SUB-ROMAN BRITAIN

It is quite impossible to determine the exact origin of the Christian religion in Britain, though persistent attempts have been made to carry its beginning back to the very dawn of the Christian era. In this way some half-dozen apostles have been brought to these shores, notably St Paul. The earliest writer who has been held to state that the great Apostle of the Gentiles came to Britain is the Gallic poet and bishop Venantius Fortunatus, who wrote in the latter half of the sixth century. But this view is drawn from a faulty reading of his verse, and in any case a line or two of poetry is no firm foundation for a historical fact.¹ A much earlier writer, Clement of Rome, stated that Paul came to 'the boundary of the West',² but this could refer to Spain and not necessarily Britain, or could be a merely rhetorical designation of the western extremities of the Empire. Welsh legend tells how Bran the Blessed, father of the British hero Caratacus, went to Rome as a hostage for his son, became a Christian during his sojourn there, and brought the Faith back with him to Britain, early in the second half of the first century. But Tacitus, who gives an account of Caratacus, and mentions his wife, daughters, and brothers, says nothing of his father.³ Indeed the latter must certainly have been dead at the time, to allow of his son's being possessed of the chieftainship.

The most famous and beautiful legend of all relating to the conversion of Britain is of course that of Joseph of Arimathea, who is said to have arrived in Britain with twelve companions in the year 63 at the bidding of the apostle Philip. According to this tradition Joseph brought with him the Holy Grail, and built at Glastonbury the first British church. The story first appears in the writings of the twelfth-century William of Malmesbury,⁴ and probably had its origin amongst the Glastonbury monks. It was subsequently repeated by many medieval writers with sundry variations, and after surviving the Reformation period, was assailed by archbishop Ussher in the first half of the seventeenth century and finally demolished by Edward

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10904-8 - The Church in Anglo-Saxon England

John Godfrey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CHURCH IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Stillingfleet, bishop of Worcester, in 1685. The latter writer, however, made out a case for the coming of St Paul to Britain which convinced many historians until comparatively recent times.⁵

Controversialists of the Reformation period and beyond found in the theme of the arrival of Christianity in Britain a happy playground. Thus archbishop Ussher in his *Discourse of the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish and the British*, published in 1631, was anxious to demonstrate the non-papal ancestry of the British Church. Writers belonging to the Reformed Churches tried hard to show that the earliest Church of these islands was actually a Protestant Church, which was a distortion of the truth. On the other hand Romanists sought to prove that the Church of Britain was a daughter of Rome, making much of the story of Lucius. According to this account, which apparently was a Roman tradition of sixth-century origin,⁶ in 167 Lucius, king of the Britons, requested pope Eleutherus to send missionaries to his country. According to Bede,⁷ the mission was a success, and the Britons preserved their new faith uncorrupted and entire, until the time of Diocletian (284–305). Lucius was certainly a historical figure, but Bede erred in thinking he had anything to do with Britain. There could have been no native British ruler at this time with the power of independent action which the story implies, especially when the object of Lucius' request was at variance with official Roman policy. Lucius was otherwise known as Agbarus IX, king of Edessa (or Britium). The story is not mentioned by the sixth-century writer Gildas, the usual authority for early Church history in Britain used by Bede, who has clearly adopted the Roman tradition. The ninth-century British writer Nennius repeats the story.⁸

Such legends, of great interest in themselves, have a historical value in that they indicate by implication the very early advent of Christianity to this country. It is perhaps an overstatement to say that the legends were invented to explain a fact, but there is at least this grain of truth or likelihood in the Lucius story—that the second half of the second century was probably the period during which the Faith was introduced to the province of Britain. There is no evidence however of any missionary activity, and we may suppose rather that there were individual contacts, commercial and military, between Britain and Gaul which resulted in a natural germination of Christianity in the former country. Even this is at best a supposition; to say more would be mere guesswork. But there is a small corpus of patristic evidence which suggests