Early British Christianity

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Inasmuch as Jesus told his disciples to go into all nations and make disciples through preaching and baptism (Matt. 28:19–20), it is obvious that the limited picture of the growth of the early Church drawn in the book of Acts does not portray the complete fulfillment of that commandment. Even the full title appended to many early manuscripts of that writing—"Acts of the Apostles"—is misleading since the first half of Acts emphasizes the ministry of the Apostles Peter and John, while the last half is devoted entirely to Paul. Geographically, the Church is portrayed in Acts as moving from Jerusalem northward to Antioch and westward through Asia Minor to Greece and Rome, culminating in Paul's arrival in the capital city to appeal his case in the court of Caesar. Two questions arise both from Luke's observable selectivity in his account and from the equally observable omission of other presumably available material: what were the other Apostles doing to fulfill Jesus' commandment to preach in all nations, and in which countries was the Christian faith most successfully established? Of related interest would be information concerning particular obstacles that Christian missionaries faced in different countries, such as the intellectual and moral challenges Paul faced in Athens and Corinth, or the Judaizing problems that occurred especially in Galatia.

Some may be skeptical that reliable information relating to these questions can be found, perhaps even feeling that if there were materials available they would already have been included in the Bible or at least widely known. In point of fact, however, such materials as are available are not widely known outside scholarly circles. In addition to a few lists of apostolic missions, such as the partial one found in Eusebius,[1] the best-known sources are apocryphal texts, such as the *Acts of Thomas,* but neither of these sources enjoys a good reputation for authenticity among scholars. Although I will not treat these legends in detail, the reader is cautioned not to dismiss them too quickly, for there is growing awareness of historical realities underlying some tales previously

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considered mythical (of which the most famous example is the Homeric *Iliad*). Fortunately for Christian materials generally discounted as legendary, there often are other resources available that bear on the subject. Embedded in patristic texts are numerous gems relating to the early spread and history of the church in diverse parts of the Roman Empire. Additionally, archaeological artifacts often provide surprising evidence for a more widespread dispersion of the Christian faith at an earlier time than might be expected. In this essay, I will treat one example of the spread of Christianity in the Roman world, namely, the evidence for early British Christianity.

Before turning to the advent of the Christian church into Britain, however, one should consider briefly the Romanization of Britain in order to establish the conditions of travel and language which early missionaries would face in proselyting there. The first invasion of Britain by Romans was led by Julius Caesar, who made two successive forays across the channel from his headquarters in Gaul in 55 and 54 B.C. While these military exploits did not result immediately in permanent occupation or the establishment of formal relationships between Britain and Rome (Caesar did take hostages and assign taxes, but there is no evidence of follow-through on an official or regular basis), the initial contact had been made that would lead in time to plans for a full-scale invasion and occupation of the island. Before the well-known conquest of Britain by Claudius in A.D. 43, each culture increased in awareness of and contact with the other. Wine jars, high quality pottery, furniture, glass, metal wares, and ivory are among the items that made their way from Roman businessmen into Britain in the century between Caesar and Claudius. In addition to giving a more detailed description of Britain than could have been acquired from Caesar's limited travels there, Strabo lists the following products of the island: grain, cattle, gold, silver, iron, animal hides, slaves, and hunting dogs.[2] All the preceding are included among the exports to Rome and her subjects. Strabo further notes that in the time of Augustus many British chieftains had succeeded by their friendship and agreements in making Britain virtually Roman property, even without a military invasion.[3] Beyond the wares typical of a thriving import-export business, I. A. Richmond mentions two items of notable interest found in the Essex area and dating from the first century A.D.:

> Amid the burnt remains of a princely cremation at Lexden, near Colchester, was found a carefully mounted medallion of Augustus, which had been cast on to the pyre with other particularly valued possessions of the dead nobleman. The mounting is Roman, and the

whole object is evidently a special present from the Roman world and of official import, precisely comparable with the portrait of King or Queen treasured by a paramount chief. No less remarkable is the little portrait bust of the Emperor Gaius (Caligula) from Colchester: nobody valued the memory of this mad and capricious ruler after his death, and the bust acquires meaning only as a contemporary token of regard by a philo-Roman notable at a time when Roman intervention was fully expected.[4]

In addition to the exchange of material goods, Juvenal asserted that "eloquent Gaul has trained British advocates (pleaders of causes),"[5] showing that at least by the end of the first century A.D. Roman culture had penetrated Britain by way of Gaul.

The Roman invasion of A.D. 43 under the direction of the Emperor Claudius thus formalized what had already been occurring for nearly a century: the subjugation of Britain, both materially and culturally, to the status of a province in the Roman Empire. Although pacification of the island (except a portion of Wales) as far north as Chester was accomplished within a quarter of a century, the most imposing monument to the Romanization of Britain was built from c. A.D. 122 to c. A.D. 128 during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, namely the wall built from Newcastle to Wallsend. The wall makes a physical statement that peace and unity south of Scotland were sufficiently well established by the beginning of the second century to necessitate a barrier against the threat of disruption or intervention from the north.

The purpose for tracing here even in this cursory fashion the early Romanization of Britain relates to a possible suggestion that perhaps Christian missionaries (or converts) were confined to the Roman Empire in their proselyting activities during the first century (or centuries?) of Christianity. Even were one to grant such a suggestion—a point not proven in any way—it does not preclude the introduction of Christianity into Britain at a very early date. Clearly, by the early second century if not before, most of Britain belonged to the world protected by Roman law, custom, and other necessary amenities.

Some legends exist relating to visits to Britain by Paul and also by Joseph of Arimathea (whose staff is said to have taken root at Glastonbury in Somerset), but they are considered without foundation by modern scholars. Paul did indicate a desire to visit Spain in his Epistle to the Romans (15:24), and Clement of Rome stated at the end of the first century A.D. that Paul "was a herald both in the East and in the West; . . . he taught righteousness to all the world, and when he had reached the limits of the West he gave his testimony before the rulers."[6] There is

nothing in either source to argue for a British visit, but some disagreement has been voiced about what constituted "the limits of the West." Without further evidence the matter cannot be decided, and the historicity of such early visits cannot be argued beyond personal feelings and beliefs. There is at present no historical evidence to support or refute the legend surrounding Joseph of Arimathea's visit to Britain.

The British ecclesiastical historian, the Venerable Bede (c. 673–735), records the arrival of Christianity to Britannia through a certain Lucius, king of the Britons, who wrote to Eleutherus, Pope of Rome in c. A.D. 161, requesting baptism into the Christian faith.[7] There is no account relating how the king heard of Christianity, and most modern commentators dismiss the entire story as fiction. Lack of evidence prevents further consideration here of the matter.

At the opposite end of the temporal spectrum for the arrival of Christianity in Britain is the position taken by many, including J. R. Green in his *Short History of the English People* (only four volumes long), in which the founding of the Christian faith in England occurs in 597 with the arrival of Augustine from Rome to establish monastic Christianity at Canterbury. If the legends of the early visits from the Apostolic era must be dismissed for lack of evidence, the Augustinian founding must be likewise rejected because of considerable evidence that Christianity was well established in Britain before his time.

If the precise date of the arrival of Christianity in Britain cannot be ascertained, some evidences provide a terminus ad quem for its presence there. Tertullian, writing against the Jews from Carthage in the late second century, gives a list of countries in which Christianity is established, and he includes Britannia: "et Britannorum inaccessa Romanis loca, Christo vero subdita" (Places of the British not visited by the Romans are subjected to the true Christ).[8] Charles Thomas argues that such an assertion "cannot possibly be taken at face value," since no Church Father in sunny Carthage could know or be concerned with such details in distant borderlands of the Roman Empire.[9] Tertullian is thus refuted, not by substantive evidence or rational discourse, but by the incredulity of a modern author who cannot accept an ancient testimony if it is out of harmony with his own reconstruction of the past.

A near-contemporary of Tertullian, Origen, likewise makes mention in his writings of the advent of Christianity in the land of Britannia, not so much arguing for it as simply accepting it as an accomplished fact.[10] However unsatisfactory to some, therefore, the literary evidence from Carthage and Alexandria-Caesarea

clearly acknowledges a considerable Christian presence in Britain by c. A.D. 200.

The great persecutions of Christianity in the Roman Empire from the reign of Decius to that of Diocletian would most likely have made martyrs of some Christians in Britain, and the most famous of these is Albanus. Bede's account of St. Alban's martyrdom at Verulamium is taken from earlier records, including those of Constantius (*Life of Germanus*) and perhaps others now unknown, and places that martyrdom—with those of Aaron and Lucias at Chester—in the persecution of Diocletian in 303–11.[11] But Thomas argues against the Diocletian setting. He reasons that if one places the martyrdoms in the persecution of Decius (250–51) or that of Valerian (257–59) the loss of names and details would have occurred more naturally in a two-century period than in the shorter time of a century and a half.[12] There is also implied in his argument for the earlier date a more visible Christian presence in Britain by at least the early third century.

Archaeological evidence relating to British Christianity in the third century or earlier is not overwhelming or uncontested, but one noteworthy example appears beyond dispute. In 1868 a word-square, or acrostic, was found "scratched in rustic capitals on a fragment of red wall-plaster from a Roman house at Cirencester (Corinium), reading *Rotas/Opera/Tenet/Arepo/Sator,* and generally translated: 'The sower Arepo holds the wheels carefully.' "[13] The discovery that the letters of the acrostic could be formed into a cross composed of *Pater Noster* with an alpha and omega (A and O) before and after each Pater Noster was made in 1926 by Felix Grosser,[14] and Toynbee concludes from an analysis of the evidence relating to this famous discovery that "its appearance on our Roman plaster-fragment would seem to attest, although it cannot absolutely prove, the presence of Christians in the Romano-British city of Corinium in the third, or even in the second century."[15]

During the Diocletianic persecution of the Christians that broke out on 23 February 303, Constantius, who was the reigning Augustus over the areas of Gaul, Spain, and Britain, refused to carry out persecutions against Christians living in his domain although he did allow churches to be destroyed.[16] While there is no way of determining how many of the destroyed churches were in Britain rather than Spain or Gaul, some demolition must have occurred on the island, for one of Constantine's first acts after acceding to power at York after the death of his father, Constantius, on 25 July 306, was to end formally the persecution of Christians (including the destruction of their buildings) in his realm and to restore status and privileges to the Church.[17] Endless debates have failed to answer

the question of Constantine's own conversion or that concerning early family contacts with Christianity, but his role as benefactor and protector of the Christians is beyond doubt. The action taken at York on behalf of Christians could not fail to have been politically beneficial in Britain as well as in Gaul and Spain, since the army of his father proclaimed Constantine as emperor in Britain and he ruled for some time from there.[18]

The second decade of the fourth century not only brought a cessation of the Great Persecution of Christianity, a peace led by Constantine and begun in Britain, but also introduced the age of the church councils called under the authority of the emperor, among the earliest of which was the Council of Arles held in 314.[19] Among the thirty-three bishops present at the council were three from Britain: Eborius of York, Restitutus of London, and Adelphius of either Lincoln or Colchester.[20] Athanasius affirms that bishops from Britain also participated in the Council of Serdica held in October 342,[21] although he does not specify them by name or particular location in his earlier list of names of the participants.[22] An unspecified number of British bishops also attended the synod called by the Emperor Constantius to assemble at Ariminum in 359. Sulpicius Severus, in his account of the council, states that provisions and lodging were to be provided for all the bishops but that the bishops from Aquitania, Gaul, and Britain refused to accept public assistance—all except three of the British bishops who, because of personal poverty, took advantage of the emperor's offer.[23]
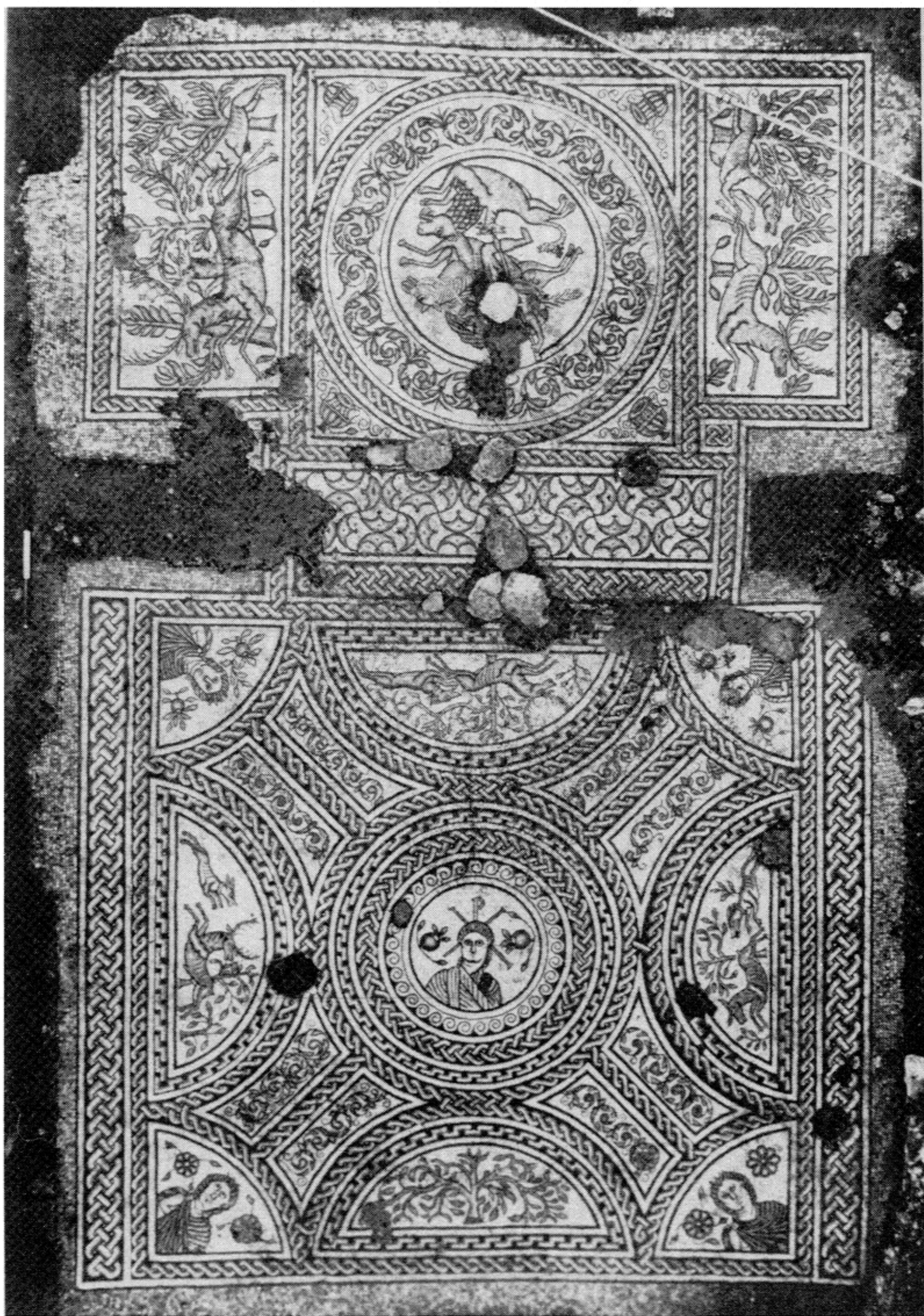
Apart from the multiple references confirming the presence of sufficient numbers of Christians in Britain during the first half of the fourth century to justify organizing them into separate dioceses, each presided over by a bishop, Toynbee writes, "Nothing is known of the cathedrals of the three British bishops who attended the Council of Arles, at York, London, and probably Colchester, or of those of the bishops who went to the Council of Ariminum." Toynbee suggests, however, that such cathedral-churches did exist throughout the province and were either destroyed completely or perhaps still await discovery.[24] Athanasius makes reference to the churches in Britain in a letter written to the Emperor Jovian soon after his accession in 363, in which the exiled bishop assures the emperor that nearly all churches in Christendom have assented to the Nicene creed, including those of Britain.[25] The claim is clearly exaggerated, at least when he claims that the Eastern churches of Egypt, Syria, Cappadocia, etc., are also overwhelmingly supportive of the Nicene position. One can only wonder if his assertion relating to Britain must be taken at face value, or if it is just a

propaganda claim to strengthen his own position with the new emperor. Nevertheless, the clear indication seems to be that there were churches in Britain at this period.

The archaeology of fourth-century Britain gives additional evidence that Christianity was established in the province. A certain Syagrius, who was a dealer in metal during the fourth century, used the "Chi-Rho" monogram as his trademark.[26] In the Thames near Battersea several ingots of pewter have been found (70–80 percent tin, 20–30 percent lead) stamped with his name, followed by the Chi-Rho and either the letters Alpha and Omega or a Christian motto, "[There is] hope in God."[27]

A rather unusual occurrence of the Chi-Rho monogram was found in a Roman villa at Frampton, Maiden Newton, some five miles from Dorchester in Dorset. In the dining room of the villa was a tesselated pavement decorated with typical scenes of mythology, including the head of Neptune attended by dolphins. A semicircular extension was later added to the pavement on the side where the Neptune head is, and in the center of the extension is a circle in which was inlaid the Chi-Rho monogram.[28] The natural explanation for the unusual pavement is that the owner of the villa was at least nominally converted to Christianity and proceeded to give acknowledgement to the new God alongside the old in the decoration of the dining room.

The most spectacular Christian mosaic from Roman Britain was discovered in 1963 at the village of Hinton St. Mary in northern Dorset.[29] The mosaic measures slightly more than 28 by 19 feet, and the design resembles that of the Frampton mosaic mentioned above. In both pavements (and also at Lullingstone), the myth of Bellerophon attacking the Chimaera is depicted, perhaps an allegorical representation of a heavenly warrior warring against evil and also perhaps connected with the popular legend of St. George and the Dragon.[30] The Hinton St. Mary mosaic is divided into two portions (see accompanying illustrations), the smaller containing the Bellerophon roundel in a square flanked by rectangles with hounds chasing stags, and the larger containing a roundel in a square. On three sides of the square are hunting scenes with hounds chasing stags and a hind, and the fourth side contains a large spreading tree. In each corner of the square is a male bust, perhaps representing four Gospel authors.[31] The roundel in the middle of the square contains a bust "facing east, worked with especial care, and very well preserved, of a fair-haired, clean-shaven man with dark, rather penetrating eyes. He is heavily draped in an inner and an outer garment, *tunica,* and *pallium,* and has the Chi-Rho monogram behind his head and a pomegranate in the field on either side

Christian mosaic found at Hinton St. Mary, Dorset, England.
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

of him."[32] If, as is usually suggested, the bust is that of Christ, the pomegranates would then represent immortality, the tree is the Tree of Life, and the other scenes represent paradise. The major argument against identifying the bust with Christ is the unsuitability of having his picture on the floor where one might step on it. Every other aspect of the mosaic, especially with the Chi-Rho behind the head, argues for the interpretation suggested above. If so, this fourth-century mosaic contains the earliest known depiction of Christ in Britain.[33]

Yet another mosaic from Dorset dates from the same period.[34] The general scheme of this mosaic is similar to part of that in Hinton St. Mary, and contains two rings decorated with the Chi-Rho monogram. Although the rings are now lost, they are known from drawings made before they disappeared, and Toynbee suggests that the same firm may have made all three of the Dorset mosaics in the fourth century.[35]

Another Roman villa at Lullingstone, Kent, contained a house-church that was destroyed in the early fifth century. Interestingly, the building containing the rooms that were decorated with date-palms and other symbols and used for Christian worship and ritual practices was earlier devoted to pagan worship. The excavators assert that libations made in votive pots placed before portrait busts in one room continued through the period of Christian activity in the adjoining rooms, making the villa an unusual example of a site where pagan and Christian worship were concurrently practiced.[36]

Charles Thomas raises the question of how to interpret the mosaics and artwork of these examples, pointing out that "the motifs which they show certainly come within the broad description of being 'mythological'; but in specific terms they are better described as Dionysiac or Gnostic."[37] After admitting that pre-Constantinian Christian art could have Gnostic elements, he suggests a syncretism of Gnosticism and paganism with Christianity in Britain.[38] If that were the case, many more pavements and artifacts could be added to those listed above in considering the nature of the Christian religion in the fourth century.

Numerous hoards of silver and pewter-ware have been discovered from the southern coast of Britain north to Hadrian's wall.[39] A common element of the hoards is the spoon, many of which are decorated with the Chi-Rho and Alpha and Omega in the bowls or handles. One such hoard, the Water Newton collection, found in 1975 near Chesterton, Huntingdonshire (within the Roman town of Durobrivae), contains a wide selection of bowls, dishes, jugs, cups, a strainer, plaques, and related artifacts from the

Detail from Christian mosaic found at Hinton St. Mary, Dorset, England.
Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

early to middle fourth century.[40] Thomas argues for community ownership and usage, rather than private, for the hoard,[41] but the abundant Chi-Rho and Alpha-Omega decorations prove a wealthy Christian presence, whether public or private. The plaques, however, also have pagan votive inscriptions, raising again the question of syncretism or perhaps of dual usage by pagan and Christian (as suggested in the Lullingstone church-house). Perhaps pagan materials were simply taken over and adapted by Christian converts in their own religious services. John Chandler, in a 1978 lecture at Dorchester, addressed some of the questions raised by this mingling of Christian and pagan symbols:

> The very existence of these objects suggests a notion of Christianity current in Britain which would have horrified the Church leaders on the Continent. But would their horror have been greater than that inspired by a picture of Christ's Head on a mosaic floor, in a place where (worshippers apart) house-servants with brooms and mops could hardly avoid the act of sweeping and rinsing Our Lord's image?[42]

The most impressive hoard yet discovered in Britain is the one found near Mildenhall, Suffolk, in 1942 and presently housed in the British Museum. There are thirty-four pieces in the collection, of which the "most beautiful object to survive from Roman Britain" is a silver dish measuring nearly two feet in diameter and weighing more than eighteen pounds.[43] The artwork of the pieces includes a mixture of pagan and Christian motifs, including the Chi-Rho and Alpha-Omega designs found elsewhere, but Painter argues against the treasure's having any specifically religious purpose. The date given to the hoard is the middle of the fourth century, and Painter suggests that it may have belonged to a Roman general named Lupicinus, who had been sent to Britain to quell barbarian revolts. Because many of the pieces were perhaps made in Gaul and Italy, their existence in Britain among a general's personal belongings may not be indicative of British Christianity as such. The hypothesis concerning Lupicinus's ownership of the treasure is unproved, however, and the presence of such wealth in fourth-century Britain is eloquent proof that not all Christians living in the province (whether native or foreign) were impoverished.

In addition to artifacts relating to the life and wealth of Christians living in Roman Britain, there are numerous tombstones that can likely be ascribed to Christians. According to R. G. Collingwood, ordinary Roman tombstones contain the formula "*Dis Manibus,* 'To The Divine Departed,' " which is often (though not always) replaced by the Christian epithet "*Hic Iacet,* 'Here Lies.' " Furthermore, while pagan tombstones usually "reckon the

age of the deceased in years, months, and days, Christian epitaphs take a certain pride in ignoring detail and use the formula *plus minus,* 'more or less,' in giving the age."[44]

Of considerable interest to the present inquiry, and in addition to the tombstones, are observations relating to burial alignments in Roman-British cemeteries. The author has been excavating a large necropolis in Egypt for some years and had observed a shift in burial alignment, which, corresponding with other data, implied that the shift occurred with the arrival of Christianity in that region. Similarly, the excavation of a cemetery at Lankhills, Winchester, revealed some noteworthy characteristics in grave alignments:

> First, cemeteries where graves were aligned in an orderly manner, perhaps on a topographical feature, were much more common in the fourth century than before. Thus, none of the sites in table 38 dating from that period was completely unordered, whereas two of the three cemeteries of predominately earlier date, Guilden, Morden, and Trentholme Drive, definitely were. Second, graves with their heads to the west seem to have been comparatively normal in the fourth century and rare if not unknown before. Thus, whereas none of the fourth-century cemeteries in table 38, apart from Cirencester, had a substantial number of graves with heads other than to the west, it is hard to point to any definitely second- or third-century burials that were so aligned. It can be concluded that east-west alignment was prevalent in the fourth century. However, it never became ubiquitous, as the cemeteries at Cirencester, Gloucester, Radles, and Margidunum demonstrate.[45]

And again:

> Although pagan cemeteries of an early date seem to have been aligned in any direction, sub-Roman Christian churches and cemeteries in Britain were almost invariably orientated. Fourth-century, and apparently Christian, graves at Poundbury Camp, Dorchester (Dorset), and possibly at Ancaster (Lincs.), also had their heads to the west.[46]

Thomas takes issue with the Macdonald interpretation of the evidence at Lankhills, asserting that since "it is most dubious that at that date (c. 300–320) the Church was necessarily strong enough to influence the layout of a cemetery like Lankhills in which pagans were (and would continue to be) buried, one can look for alternative causes." Following Philip Rahtz, Thomas argues that "it is possible that an imperial sun-cult did" have sufficiently powerful status in Britain after 313 to account for east-west burial orientation with the head to the west.[47] Syncretism would permit Christian adaptation and continuation of such a custom after its introduction by a sun-cult, but no evidence is given (or available in the sources or the

archaeological evidence) to demonstrate such a fourth-century surge in the imperial sun-cult, especially in the province where Constantine first declared an imperial cessation of the persecution of Christians. Alignment of graves is not conclusive evidence of Christianity by itself, but in the Lankhills study it does provide the most economical interpretation of the excavation data. The same can be said at the author's Egyptian excavation. The popular opinion among scholars is that Christianity did not arrive in strength in Egypt until the end of the second century, but the 180-degree shift in burial alignment (from head-east to head-west) with Christian symbols on burial clothing, etc., occurs in burials dating to no later than the end of the first century. There are no known explanations to account for such a major cultural change at that time, except for the influence of Christianity, and the popular wisdom may have to give way to a new hypothesis. Similarly in Britain, perhaps the strength of Christianity in that province by the early fourth century has been underestimated because of a lack of overwhelming evidence supporting an alternate view. In point of fact, while one can argue that the relative paucity of Christian artifacts dated to the fourth century in Britain argues for limited numbers of Christians living there, A. R. Burn argues against taking such a view:

> In short, Christianity was the dominant religion of the Empire during the last hundred years of Roman government in Britain; and yet traces of it among the Roman-British remains are few. This has often caused surprise; but it would cease to do so if it were realized how very few Roman inscriptions of any kind remain from Britain in this period. If fourth-century had been one-quarter as common as second-century or Severan inscriptions, Christianity would have left its mark.[48]

The evidence available through much of the fourth century portrays a widespread but not well-defined Christianity in Britain. The lack of definition is due both to the nonexistence of written records from the province, either biblical or patristic, and to the syncretistic nature of the archaeological evidence. Is the syncretism due to Christian converts who continued to use pagan symbols in a purely decorative sense alongside the now exclusively meaningful symbols of their new faith, or were Gnostic and pagan elements woven into the fabric of newly-acquired religious beliefs? Whatever one's response, it is impossible to substantiate the view of Athanasius in his letter to Jovian that the British churches were all supportive of the Nicene creed, with the additional implication that they were theologically harmonious with the churches of Gaul or Italy.[49]

Theological issues, besides the ones considered at Nicaea, continued to emerge and be defined in terms of orthodoxy and heresy, especially during the fourth and fifth centuries. One such subject was free will and grace, and one of the key figures in the debate was Pelagius, after whom the so-called Pelagian heresy was named. Pelagius was born in Britain in c. 354, and was probably educated in the southeastern portion of the province.[50] Apparently both wealthy and intelligent, Pelagius went to Rome in the 380s to study law,[51] and a few years later he decided to devote himself to the church rather than continue in legal practice.[52] During his fifteen or so years of preaching in Rome (to A.D. 410), Pelagius is not known to have encountered any ecclesiastical opposition although he did read Augustine's *Confessions* with repugnance for that author's dismal portrayal of "man's moral helplessness and utter dependence on God's Grace in the struggle against evil." Pelagius taught that "it was inconceivable that God could have placed men in the world without giving them both the capacity to understand his purpose and the power to carry it out."[53]

The sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric caused Pelagius, among others, to leave Rome, and he journeyed to Africa and then to Palestine. Jerome, who was living at Bethlehem, began to write his commentary on Jeremiah in c. 414, but by then was distracted by the arrival and teachings of Pelagius.[54] Despite Jerome's discomfiture concerning Pelagius's teachings on man's free will and his charges that Jerome had both depreciated marriage too vehemently and also was not so free from Origenist doctrines as he claimed, two councils of Palestinian bishops in Jerusalem and Diospolis failed to find anything wrong with the doctrines of Pelagius, even after examining the Briton in person.[55] One of Pelagius's followers, Caelestius, had remained in Africa when the teacher went to Palestine, and while in Africa was condemned by a council of African bishops in 412 for his teachings.[56] It was soon afterward that Augustine attacked the newly-defined heresy in many tractates. Because Pelagius raised problems relating to Origenism in Jerome's past and Manichaeism in Augustine's past, Evans suggests that he "appears upon the scene of controversy in the second decade of the fifth century as a representative to the two great Catholic doctors of still troublesome issues belonging to their own theological past. To be behind the times was part of Pelagius' lamentable fate."[57]

Pelagius's own theology has been summarized by Evans as an attempt "to be an orthodox theologian of the Catholic Church and to be known as such" and to define man's nature, his relationship to God, and his moral obligation.[58] With regard to man's nature,

Pelagius denied "any doctrine of original sin understood as the transmission of sin through procreation" and further stated that "no man can be said to be guilty except for a deed which proceeds from his own individual will."[59] As to God, Pelagius taught that "the eternal Son, consubstantial with the Father, assumes human nature in both body and soul, and endures the condemnation of death that is due to men because of their sins. The death which he undergoes is not due to him both because as man he is without sin and because he is the Creator of the universe."[60] Christ is both revealer and example for man, and "the benefit of the redeeming death of Christ Christians receive as the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of baptism. Grace in this sense justifies the ungodly and makes him to be 'without sin.' "[61] Man's moral obligation is thus to follow the example of Christ and be fortified through the revelation of Christ so as to become sinless and thus be saved by the proper exercise of his free will.[62] Pelagius's emphasis on man's free will and the potential to become sinless were especially denounced by his detractors.[63]

Just how or when this heresy reached Britain is not at all certain, but since Pelagius never returned to his homeland it must have been found there before his time or taken to the province by some of his followers. Some slight evidence is thought to exist for the presence of Pelagian thinking in Britain by the beginning of the fifth century, for Victricius wrote in *Liber de Laude Sanctorum I* that his fellow bishops in Gaul had asked him to go to Britain and make peace, although the nature of the dispute was not spelled out.[64] Pelagius was not attacked for his beliefs until the second decade of the century, and even then two councils in Palestine found him innocent of heresy, so it is unlikely that a visit to Britain by the bishop of Roven in the first decade of the century would have been for the purpose of refuting a heresy which was as yet undefined and not under attack elsewhere.

There is no question that Pelagianism was popular in Britain by the early part of the fifth century, however, and after it was defined as heretical by such leading figures as Jerome and Augustine, one would expect it to be attacked by ecclesiastical leaders in an attempt to exert dominance over churches and thus establish their particular brand of orthodoxy throughout Christendom. The "attack" was launched in 429, led by Germanus, the bishop of Auxerre in Gaul, who went to Britain in response to a request by a legation made up of non-Pelagian British Christians.[65] The Gallic bishop made four trips to Britain to assist in eradicating the heresy, and in the late fifth-century account of Germanus written by Constantius of Lyon there is no doubt that the mission

was to reclaim heretics rather than convert the heathen.[66] Prosper of Aquitaine is even more forceful in his description of events, stating that Pope Celestine, on the suggestion of Deacon Palladius, sent Germanus to Britain as his personal representative to confound the heretics and lead the British into the Catholic faith.[67] Germanus's efforts were not very successful, and in 431 the Pope sent Palladius himself to Britain, after consecrating him as "the first bishop to the Irish Christians."[68] By implanting Catholic ecclesiastical leaders in an area heavily populated by heretics, much as in the case of Demetrius going to Egypt to establish Catholic Christianity in 193, the Pope attempted to establish a foothold for the Catholic faith and extend its influence in areas where alternate versions of the faith prevailed. Germanus planned to augment the Catholic presence in Britain by sending Patrick as a priest in the care of a senior priest, but when word arrived that Palladius had died, Patrick was consecrated bishop in his place. Patrick himself acknowledged that his appointment was approved over "considerable opposition by a synod of British bishops."[69]

The attempt to establish Catholicism as the faith in Britain was continuing well over a century later, for in 596 Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine, then prior of St. Andrew's monastery in Rome, to found the Church in England. (Again, one is reminded of Egypt, where a similar attempt by Demetrius was still in process well over a century later when Athanasius made numerous attempts to wear down the overwhelming local opposition to his episcopacy.) Arriving in Kent in 597, Augustine was quite successful, and soon returned to Arles to be consecrated bishop of Canterbury. For many, this "new founding" is considered the real establishment of the Christian faith in Britain, but to make such an assertion is to ignore more than three centuries of well-attested Christianity in that land.

During the latter portion of that period, with the withdrawal of the Roman military and apparent breakdown of Roman governmental apparatus during the Anglo-Saxon invasions, there is little record of association between the Church on the continent of Europe and the Church in the British Isles. When contact was renewed at the beginning of the seventh century, the Irish and the Britons were found to have certain peculiarities of ecclesiastical organization and religious practice that marked them off from their continental brethren and which have led some modern writers to designate them "the Celtic church."[70]

The noted peculiarities were, in all likelihood, the remnants of the Christian faith that had been established long before the coming of the "new" faith. Myres proposes a rather novel theory

that in the deteriorating social world of the Roman Empire, Pelagianism, with its emphasis on free will and moral obligations for man, was at least partially responsible for throwing off the Roman yoke of authority in the fifth century.[71] There is ancient historical support for his position in Zosimus, a fifth-century historian and government administrator who wrote a history of the Roman Empire. This well-regarded writer states that "the people living on the British island and some of the Celtic tribes had revolted from the rule of the Romans and were subsisting on their own" and "after donning armor they were fighting for themselves and had freed their cities from the attacking barbarians."[72] The removal of the political yoke, with its accompanying ecclesiastical yokefellow, was not entirely successful, however, for the ecclesiastical harness would again be placed upon Britain within a few centuries, and would remain for nearly a millennium until its removal in the British Reformation.

NOTES

[1]Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.1, in vol. 20 of *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Paris: Migne, 1857–87), 214–15.

[2]Strabo, *Geography* 4.5.2, in *Loeb Classical Library* 243 (1924; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 253–57.

[3]Ibid. 4.5.3, in *Loeb Classical Library*, 257–59.

[4]I. A. Richmond, *Roman Britain*, vol. 1 of *The Pelican History of Britain* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 13.

[5]Juvenal, *Satires* 15.111, in *Loeb Classical Library* 59 (1924; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 296–97.

[6]Clement, *Epistola 1 ad Corinthios* (commentary on 1 Cor. 5:6–7), in vol. 1 of *Patrologiae Graeca*, 218–19.

[7]Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.4, in vol. 95 of *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* (Paris: Migne, 1841–79), 30.

[8]Tertullian, *Adversus Judaeos*, in vol. 2 of *Patrologia Latina*, 650.

[9]Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (London: Batsford, 1981), 43.

[10]See, for example, Origen, *In Ezechielem, Homilia 4*, in vol. 13 of *Patrologia Graeca*, 698: "Quando enim terra Britanniae ante adventum Christi in unius Dei consensit religionem? . . . Nunc vero propter Ecclesias, quae mundi limites tenent, universa terra cum laetitia clamat ad Dominum Israel" (When did the land of Britain, before the advent of Christ, agree to the worship of the one god? . . . Now, truly, because of the churches which occupy the boundaries of the world, the entire earth shouts with joy to the Lord of Israel). See also Commentariorum Series in Matthaeum, in vol. 13 of *Patrologiae Graeca*, 1655: "de Britannis . . . quorum plurimi nondum audierunt Evangelii verbum" (concerning the people of Britain . . . of whom the majority have not yet heard the word of the Gospel)—implying that many had heard.

[11]Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.7, 32–35.

[12]Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 48.

[13]J. M. C. Toynbee, "Christianity in Roman Britain," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3d ser., 16 (1953): 2.

[14]Felix Grosser, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 29 (1926): 165–69, cited in Toynbee, "Christianity in Roman Britain," 2.

[15]Toynbee, "Christianity in Roman Britain," 3.

[16]Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, in vol. 7 of *Patrologiae Latina*, 216–17.

[17]Ibid. 24, pp. 233–34.

[18]Ibid. 24–25, pp. 233–35.

[19]Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 10.5, 879–93. Constantine called this council, and it was convened on 1 August 314, with some thirty-three bishops present from Gallic Prefecture, comprised of Britain, Gaul, Spain, and portions of Morocco (see Frend, "Religion in Roman Britain in the Fourth Century A.D.," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3d ser., 18 [1955]: 1).

[20]Frend, "Religion in Roman Britain," 1.

[21]Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum ad Monachos 28*, in vol. 25 of *Patrologiae Graeca*, 725–26.

[22]Athanasius, *Apologia Contra Arianos 50*, in ibid., 337–42.

[23]Sulpicius Severus, *Historia Sacra* 2:41, in vol. 20 of *Patrologiae Latina*, 152.

[24]Toynbee, "Christianity in Roman Britain," 5.

[25]Athanasius, *Ad Imperatorem Jovianum 2*, in vol. 26 of *Patrologiae Graeca*, 816.

[26]The Chi-Rho symbol is a combination of the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*, and is called the *Labarum* in modern literature. From the time of Constantine, who saw this symbol in a vision before the fateful Battle of the Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312, it became identified with Christianity. For a lengthy discussion of the symbol in the Constantinian setting, see N. H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 60–65.

[27]J. W. Grover, "Pre-Augustine Christianity in Britain, as Indicated by the Discovery of Christian Symbols," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 23 (1867): 225; A. R. Burn, *The Romans in Britain*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 168.

[28]Burn, *Romans in Britain*, 169.

[29]J. M. C. Toynbee, "A New Roman Mosaic Pavement Found in Dorset," *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964): 7–14.

[30]Burn, *Romans in Britain*, 168–69.

[31]Toynbee, "New Roman Mosaic," 14.

[32]Ibid., 8.

[33]Ibid., 14.

[34]Thomas, *Christianity*, 104–5; Toynbee, "New Roman Mosaic," 8.

[35]Toynbee, "New Roman Mosaic," 8.

[36]G. W. Meates, *The Roman Villa at Lullingstone, Kent* (N.p.: Kent Archaeological Society, 1979), 17–23, 63–64.

[37]Thomas, *Christianity*, 104.

[38]Ibid., 104–5.

[39]Ibid., 108ff.

[40]P. C. Kent and K. S. Painter, eds., *Wealth of the Roman World, A.D. 300–700* (London: British Museum, 1977), 29–33.

[41]Thomas, *Christianity*, 113–17.

[42]Quoted in ibid., 121.

[43]Kent and Painter, *Wealth of the Roman World*, 33; Keith Branigan, *Roman Britain: Life in an Imperial Province* (London: Reader's Digest Association, 1980), 144–45.

[44]R. G. Collingwood, *Roman Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 140–41.

[45]Giles Clarke, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills*, in *Winchester Studies* 3:ii (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 352.

[46]Ibid., 424.

[47]Thomas, *Christianity*, 233.

[48]Burn, *Romans in Britain*, 166.

[49]Athanasius lists Britain as supporting the demand of Western bishops at the Council of Serdica, A.D. 342–43, for his acquittal (see *Historia Arianorum 28*, pp. 725–26).

[50]J. N. L. Myres, "Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain," *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960): 21.

[51]Ibid., 22.

[52]Jerome, *Epistle, 50*, in vol. 22 of *Patrologiae Latina*, 512–16.

[53]Myres, "Pelagius," 22. In his *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul*, Pelagius argues that God has endowed man with the capacity to become sinless and remain sinless through the grace of Christ (see, for example, *Exposition in Epistolam ad Romanos* [commentary on Rom. 6:14; 7:18; 7:21], in vol. 1, pt. 3, of *Patrologiae Latina Supplementum* [Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1958], 1140, 1144; *Exposition in Epistolam ad Galatas* [commentary on Gal. 5:17ff.], in vol. 1, pt. 3, of *Patrologiae Latina Supplementum*, 1285ff.; A. Souter, ed., "Pelagi Expositiones XIII Epistolarum Pauli," *Texts and Studies* 9 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922–1931]).

[54]Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 7–8.

[55]Jerome, *In Hieremiam*, Prologus 3–4; see also 4:41.6 in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, 74 (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols, 1953–), 1–2, 211, for a surprising use of Origen for Jerome, since the presbyter had said Origen was free from heresy. In Prologus 4, 3:60.3, pp. 2, 154, Jerome had gone too far in his depreciation of marriage. Two councils exonerating Pelagius are in Myres, "Pelagius," 23. For Pelagius on marriage, especially of widows, see *Exposition in Epistolam ad Timotheum* (commentary on 1 Tim. 5:14ff.), in vol. 1, pt. 4, of *Patrologiae Latinae Supplementum*, 1355ff. See also Augustine, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* 1:2, where a Pelagian charge is made that Catholicism condemned marriage.

[56]Augustine, *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione* 2.23, in vol. 44 of *Patrologiae Latina*, 173–74.

[57]Evans, *Pelagius,* 22.

[58]Ibid., 92. Even Augustine admits that at first he was reluctant to attack Pelagius because his life and conduct were admired by many (see *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione* 2.23, 173–74).

[59]Evans, *Pelagius,* 97. See Augustine, *De Natura et Gratia* 8, 10, 13, 34, 54, in vol. 44 of *Patrologiae Latina,* 251–53, 265–66, 277–79.

[60]Evans, *Pelagius,* 106; Pelagius, *Exposition in Epistolam ad Galatas 3:13*, pp. 1277–78; *Exposition in Epistolam ad Romanos* 3:24, pp. 1128–29; *Pelagii ad Demetriadem Epistola 2,* 10, in vol. 30 of *Patrologiae Latina,* 16–17, 25–26.

[61]Evans, *Pelagius,* 109. See Augustine, *De Gestis Pelagii* 16, in vol. 30 of *Patrologiae Latina,* 313–14.

[62]Pelagius, *De Libero Arbitro,* quoted in Augustine, *De Gratia Christi* 8, 11, in vol. 44 of *Patrologiae Latina,* 364–67; Pelagius, *Exposition in Epistolam ad Thessalonicenses 1* (commentary on 1 Thess. 1:10), in vol. 1, pt. 3 of *Patrologiae Latina Supplementum,* 1322; *Exposition in Epistolam ad Timotheum 2* (commentary on 2 Tim. 1:10), in vol. 1, pt. 4 of *Patrologiae Latina Supplementum,* 1361; *Pelagii ad Demetriadem Epistola 2,* 10, pp. 16–17, 25–26.

[63]Augustine, *Contra Duas Epistolas Pelagianorum* 4:27, in vol. 44 of *Patrologiae Latina,* 629; *Epistolam ad Hilario,* letter 157, chap. 2, in vol. 33 of *Patrologiae Latina,* 675–78.

[64]*Patrologiae Latina* 20:443–58.

[65]E. A. Thompson, *St. Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain,* in *Studies in Celtic History* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1984), 6:7.

[66]Constantius, *De St. Germano Episcopo,* in *Acta Sanctorum Julii 7* (1731; reprint, Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1970): 195–98 ("Legatio duplex in Britanniam adversus Pelagianos").

[67]Prosper of Aquitaine, *Chronicle,* ed. Theodor Mommsen, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica,* vol. 9 of *Auct. Ant.* (N.p., n.d.), 472.

[68]A. B. E. Hood, ed. and trans., *St. Patrick, His Writings and Muirchu's Life* (London: Phillimore, 1978), 5.

[69]Ibid., 6.

[70]James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland,* 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 1:171.

[71]Myres, "Pelagius," 21–36, esp. 31ff.

[72]Zosimus, *Historiae* 6.5, vol. 50 of *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonnae: Impensis ed. Weberi, 1828–97), 321–22.