

bede and the augustine's oak conferences: implications for anglo-british ecclesiastical interaction in early anglo-saxon england

Martin Grimmer

Abstract

In Bede's representation of relations between the British church and the Roman church of the Anglo-Saxons, one of the defining events concerns Augustine of Canterbury's two meetings, c 602-604, with a group of British bishops at 'Augustine's Oak' on the border of the West Saxons and the Hwicce. The Augustine's Oak conferences are the first of Bede's ecclesiastical 'set pieces' which marshal Roman against British and Irish Columban practice. Bede is the only source for these meetings, and because of his distance both in time and in location from the events, his description has been labelled as an 'ecclesiastical saga' of uncertain authenticity. However, there are indications that Bede's account was not simply an imaginative reconstruction. Bede appears to have relied on both Anglo-Saxon and British sources in his rendering of the meetings. Although some of the details may be dubious, he reveals a plausible picture of ecclesiastical interaction between Anglo-Saxons and Britons, which saw the Britons branded as schismatic by the Roman church, and which memorialised a pattern of distrust and isolation. The aim of this paper is to analyse Bede's presentation of the events surrounding the Augustine's Oak conferences and the implications for Anglo-British ecclesiastical interaction during the early Anglo-Saxon period.

In Bede's representation of relations between the British church and the Roman church of the Anglo-Saxons, one of the defining events concerns Augustine of Canterbury's two meetings, c 602-604, with a group of British bishops at a place called Augustine's Oak. Described in book 2 chapter 2 of his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People, completed in 731), the Augustine's Oak conferences are the first of Bede's ecclesiastical 'set pieces' which marshal Roman against British and Irish Columban practice (the second being the Synod of Whitby which occurred in 664).¹ Bede is the only source for these meetings, and

¹ All references to *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (henceforth *HE*) will be cited by book and chapter numbers from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed and trans B Colgrave and R A B Mynors (Oxford, 1969), although I have varied Colgrave and Mynors' translation in some of the subsequent quotes to give a more literal meaning. The dates of c 602-604 for the meetings are suggested by C Stancliffe, 'The British church and the mission of Augustine', 107-151 in R Gameson (ed), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud, 1999) at p 124, on the basis that they probably occurred fairly

because of his distance both in time and in location from the events, some historians have regarded his account as an ‘ecclesiastical saga’ of uncertain authenticity.² Others show more respect for the historicity of the meetings; while some of the details might be dubious, there are indications that Bede’s account was not simply an imaginative reconstruction.³ My aim in this paper is to analyse Bede’s transmission of the events surrounding the Augustine’s Oak conferences, and the implications for Anglo-British ecclesiastical interaction during the early Anglo-Saxon period.

Bede’s account of Augustine’s encounters with the British bishops can be divided into three sections, the first two of which are of primary interest here.⁴ In the first section, Bede tells of Augustine’s initial colloquium with the ‘bishops and scholars of the nearest British province’ (*episcopus siue doctores proximaе Brettonum provinciae*), summoned with the aid of Æthelberht of Kent, who was the third of Bede’s imperium-wielding kings of the Anglo-Saxons.⁵ The colloquium was said by Bede to have been convened at a place which ‘still today in the language of the English is called *Augustinaes Ác*, that is Augustine’s Oak’ (*usque hodie lingua Anglorum Augustinaes Ác, id est Robur Augustini ... appellatur*), somewhere along the boundary between the Hwicce and the West Saxons. This has tentatively been identified as Aust in Gloucestershire, on the southern, Anglo-Saxon side of the Severn crossing, directly opposite the mouth of the Wye.⁶ At this meeting Augustine urged the British delegation

close in time after the arrival of Pope Gregory’s letters in 601 (*HE* I.27, I.29, I.31). The Synod of Whitby is described in *HE* III.25.

² N K Chadwick, ‘The battle of Chester: a study of sources’ 167-185 in N K Chadwick (ed), *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border* (Cambridge, 1963) at p 169. N J Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1997) 104 note 73, suggests that P Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800* (Cambridge, 1990) 9, subscribes to this assessment. However, in my view this is an inaccurate reading, as Sims-Williams goes on at p 78 to argue for a credible origin for the story.

³ Higham, 106-107; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 78; Stancliffe, 107-151, and especially 131-132.

⁴ This segmentation of Bede’s account of Augustine’s Oak and its sequelae into three sections is proposed by Stancliffe, 124-125. Higham, 106, also talks of subsections in Bede’s account.

⁵ *HE* II.5.

⁶ Although the specific location of Augustine’s Oak is unknown, Aust (Gloucestershire) has been suggested on aetiological grounds. The name is attested in the seventh century, rendered as *aet Austin* in a Worcester charter of the 690s: Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 78. Aust would certainly have been a most suitable location for such a meeting, positioned opposite the mouth of the Wye, a possible route of travel for the British bishops. The bishops would not then have had to travel over Anglo-Saxon territory. See also Higham, 110; H R Loyn, ‘The conversion of the English to Christianity: some comments on the

to join with him in catholic unity to preach the faith to the pagan Anglo-Saxons, as well exhorting them to comply with Roman custom, especially regarding the date of Easter. Though the Britons were moved by Augustine's demonstration of righteousness in the healing of a blind Englishman whom they themselves were unable to cure, they refused to abandon their own customs without the consent and approval of their own people. Thus, a second, more extensive, conference was arranged.

In the next section of Bede's account he tells of this second meeting, which presumably occurred at the same location, although Bede is not explicit about this. He first recounts that the meeting was 'as they say' (*ut perhibent*) attended by:

Seven British bishops and many most learned men ... chiefly from their most famous monastery which is called in the language of the English *Bancornaburg* [ie Bangor-is-Coed] (*VII Brettonum episcopi et plures viri doctissimi, maxime de nobilissimo eorum monasterio quod vocatur lingua Anglorum Bancornaburg*). It is said (*narratur*) to have been ruled over at the time by Abbot Dinoot.

Bede then states that the Britons had in the interim consulted a holy anchorite, who advised them to follow Augustine only if he demonstrated the true humility of a man of God and rose to greet them when they arrived for the meeting. On their entrance, however, Augustine obstinately remained seated. He declared that he would allow the Britons most of their eccentric customs if they agreed to three things: to keep Easter at the correct time, to complete the rite of baptism according to Roman custom, and to join him in preaching to the Anglo-Saxons. The British bishops refused, stating also that they would not accept him as their bishop, for if they did they feared he would cease to respect them. As a consequence, Augustine, 'it is said' (*fertur*), prophesied that the Britons 'would one day suffer the vengeance of death'. This was visited upon them some years later in the form of the battle of Chester (c 613-616), the event which makes up the third section of Bede's account, during which 1200 monks from Bangor-is-Coed were slaughtered by the Northumbrian king Æthelfrith and his army.⁷

Celtic contribution' 20-44 in H R Loyn, *Society and Peoples: Studies in the History of England and Wales, c. 600-1200* (London, 1992) at p 30.

⁷ Bede himself provides no specific date for the battle, only that it occurred some time after the Augustine's Oak conferences. Elsewhere in the passage, Bede alludes to the battle having occurred long after Augustine's death, which happened between 604 and 609. Chadwick, 167-185; D P Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1991) 72; B Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990) 83, all propose a date close to 616, the year Æthelfrith died.

Looking more closely at Bede's narrative, there appear to be differences between the sections of his Augustine's Oak account which suggest that they do not all derive from the same source.⁸ The first section is presented in a straightforward manner from Augustine's point of view, with no suggestion that Bede was using anything other than what he considered to be a credible source. The second section, on the other hand, is described from the Britons' perspective, and contains several indications that Bede received the information from what he regarded as a less reliable source. Phrases used in this section – *ut perhibent* ('as they say'), *narratur* ('it is said/related'), and *fertur* ('it is said') – imply that Bede was less sure about what he was writing, and perhaps suggest an oral element somewhere in its transmission.⁹ Additionally, there are certain stylistic discrepancies between the sections: for example, the British *doctores* of the first section become *virī doctissimi* in the second. A further observation of more import is that the sections differ in how Augustine and the Britons are presented.¹⁰ In the first section, Bede focuses on Augustine as the 'true herald of the heavenly light' (*verus summae lucis praeco*), so-called, as compared to the ineffective Britons who failed to heal the blind man. In the second section, however, Bede includes certain phrases which present the Britons in a rare favourable light: calling the men from Bangor-is-Coed 'most learned' (*doctissimi*); the monastery itself 'most famous' (*nobilissimo*), and the British anchorite 'holy and prudent' (*sanctum ac prudentem*). Augustine's prophesy of a vengeful death for the Britons – presented almost as a curse – similarly smacks of a British origin. The second and third sections also contain details which reveal a British source: the spelling of the names 'Dinoot' and 'Brocmal', the inclusion of the British name 'Carlegion' for Chester, and information concerning the make-up and workings of the Bangor-is-Coed monastery.¹¹ It is particularly noteworthy, in this regard, that Æthelfrith's forces at Chester are referred to as barbarians, a detail that surely proclaims a British point of view.¹²

It is quite plausible then that the first and the second (and third) sections of Bede's Augustine's Oak narrative, or at least significant elements of them, were of different origins. The first section probably derived from a Canterbury source, perhaps even a document, which came to

⁸ See also Higham, 105; Stancliffe, 125.

⁹ H Moisl, 'Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies and Germanic oral tradition', *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981) 215-248, at p 224.

¹⁰ Stancliffe, 125-126.

¹¹ Chadwick, 169; Higham, 105; K H Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953) 295; Stancliffe, 125, 127-128.

¹² 'Most of these monks ... [were] guarded by a certain Brocmal, who was there to guard them from the swords of the barbarians [*barbarorum gladiis*] while they were intent on prayer': *HE* II.2.

Bede from his principal Canterbury authority Abbot Albinus.¹³ The second section contains elements which almost certainly announce a British source, or British influence in its transmission.¹⁴ Bede's more qualified presentation of the second section of his account suggests that the first section should be regarded as the more reliable, at least as far as he was concerned.¹⁵ However, there are indications that Bede was not simply extemporising.¹⁶ The British names and the information regarding Bangor-is-Coed are arguably credible, as is Bede's description of the Bangor scholars as *doctores* or *virī doctissimi*, terms which match the earlier description *magister elegans* used by the British historian Gildas in his *De Excidio Britanniae*.¹⁷ The relatively favourable presentation of the Britons in the second section is also not likely to have been Bede's invention; neither is his statement in the first section that the British bishops preferred to consult more widely amongst their colleagues before committing themselves to a decision.¹⁸ The nature of Augustine's demands of the

¹³ *HE* Preface. Higham, 107, points out that as Augustine and his colleagues came from a literate church culture they may have made some record of the meeting. However, he does not state why a Canterbury record of the first meeting would have survived but not a record of the second.

¹⁴ Stancliffe, 126-129, provides a lengthy discussion regarding the transmission of the British-sounding material contained in the second section of Bede's narrative. To account for the spelling of the personal names, she plumps for a documentary source – written in Latin by a Briton – which she argues may have come to Bede from the monastery of Malmesbury. Malmesbury was located in north-west Wessex near the Hwicce, and so was in the likely vicinity of Augustine's Oak; this may have led to some local interest in the colloquia which resulted in the acquisition of a British account. Malmesbury was also where Pecthelm, who became the first Anglo-Saxon bishop at the formerly British monastery of Whithorn, had been a monk. Stancliffe suggests, therefore, that Pecthelm passed this supposed British document on to Bede, perhaps providing additional oral information. Bede's use of the qualifying phrases *fertur* and so forth, may therefore have been informed by his distrust of a British text. Pecthelm had certainly been a source for some of Bede's other material (for example, the miracle stories contained in *HE* V.13, V.18), and so this hypothesis is not incredible, although the existence of an otherwise unknown British document is speculative. It is also unclear just how Malmesbury would have obtained such a document. See P Sims-Williams, 'The uses of writing in early medieval Wales' 15-38 in H Pryce (ed), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* (Cambridge, 1998) at p 20-28, on the level of textuality in early medieval Wales.

¹⁵ Higham, 107.

¹⁶ The main points of this argument are put forward by Stancliffe, 131-132.

¹⁷ *De Excidio Britanniae* 36.1. All references to *De Excidio Britanniae* (henceforth *DEB*) will be cited by chapter and section numbers from *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*, ed and trans M Winterbottom (London, 1978).

¹⁸ The *Annales Cambriae* record under the year 601 the 'synod of *Urbs Legionis*' (Chester), which might be a reference to this wider meeting of the British clergy. Chester is, of course, in the immediate vicinity of Bangor-is-Coed. The *Annales*

Britons similarly suggests that Bede was drawing on extant material. On the one hand, there is no mention of the British tonsure, an issue which Bede emphasises at various other points in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*.¹⁹ On the other, Augustine's requirement that the Britons adopt the Roman rite of baptism is never mentioned again in the work. This suggests that Bede was not simply anachronistically applying the issues of his own day to the time of Augustine. There are, therefore, grounds for accepting the historicity of the Augustine's Oak conferences.

What then can these meetings reveal of ecclesiastical interaction between the Anglo-Saxons and the Britons? Of most significance is Augustine's expectation that the British bishops should accept his authority as bishop of Canterbury.²⁰ Prior to the colloquia, Augustine had sent to Rome for direction from Pope Gregory regarding a number of matters, including what his relationship was to be with the bishops of Gaul and Britain. Gregory replied that Augustine was to have no authority over the Gallic bishops, but stated that 'we commit to you, my brother, all the bishops of Britain [*Brittaniarum ... omnes episcopos*] that the unlearned may be instructed, the weak strengthened by your counsel, and the perverse corrected by your authority'.²¹ This sentiment was reinforced in a further letter of 601, in which Gregory similarly stated that Augustine was to have:

Under [his] subjection ... all the bishops of Britain [*omnes Britanniae sacerdotes*], under the guidance of our Lord God, Jesus Christ: so that they may see from the words and actions of your Holiness what true faith and good living are like.²²

Cambriae (henceforth *AC*) are cited by year from *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* ed and trans J Morris (Chichester, 1980).

¹⁹ *HE* III.25, V.21. On the tonsure question, see E James, 'Bede and the tonsure question', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 84-98; D McCarthy, 'On the shape of the Insular tonsure', *Celtica* 24 (2003) 140-167; N Venclova, 'The Venerable Bede, druidic tonsure and archaeology', *Antiquity* 76 (2002) 458-471, at p 466-468.

²⁰ While Pope Gregory clearly intended that Augustine be the most senior bishop in Britain, as will be seen, the term archbishop is nevertheless anachronistic and I have chosen not to use it. The first to be accurately labelled archbishop of the Anglo-Saxons would most probably be Theodore, who arrived in Canterbury in 669. Bede refers to Theodore as 'the first of the archbishops whom the whole English church consented to obey': *HE* IV.2.

²¹ *HE* I.27: '*Brittaniarum vero omnes episcopos tuae fraternitati committimus, ut indocti doceantur, infirmi persuasione roborentur, perversi auctoritate corrigantur*'.

²² *HE* I.29: '*omnes Britanniae sacerdotes habeat Deo Domino nostro Iesu Christo auctore subiectos; quatinus ex lingua et vita tuae sanctitatis at recte credendi, et bene vivendi formam percipiant*'.

Augustine, therefore, had a clear instruction that all the bishops of Britain were his to command, and when he met the Britons at Augustine's Oak it appears that he was acting with full papal support. This would explain Augustine's attitude of superiority over the Britons, which was most obvious in the second meeting.

What was the genesis of this attitude towards the British church? The obvious answer would be the Britons' non-compliance with certain Roman practices and the fact that they did not yet adhere to the, albeit nascent, rule of the Roman church. However, when Augustine arrived in Canterbury in 597 it is not likely that he, or Pope Gregory, knew much about the state of British Christianity.²³ Britain was remote from the Mediterranean world, and while there had been trading contact in the fifth and early sixth centuries, this had diminished, if not ceased, by the end of the sixth.²⁴ Augustine does appear to have encountered British Christians within his missionary sphere, as is revealed by his correspondence with Gregory regarding the local cult of the martyr St Sixtus,²⁵ but there is no evidence that he met any British clergy in the south-east. The remoteness of the Augustine's Oak meetings from Canterbury could imply that there were no British clergy closer at hand, although it should be allowed that Augustine's journey far to the west was so that he could meet with authorities of the British Church in or near territory which was still under their control. It is probable, nevertheless, that Augustine had no direct experience with a British church hierarchy prior to his first meeting at the Oak, and so before this he could only report to Pope Gregory of what he found in the south-east: an apparently disorganised British Christianity, barely surviving in pockets of local veneration.²⁶ In this regard, it is

²³ Stancliffe, 111-114.

²⁴ E Campbell, 'The archaeological evidence for external contacts: imports, trade and economy in Celtic Britain, A.D. 400-800' 83-96 in K R Dark (ed), *External Contacts and the Economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1996).

²⁵ Augustine's correspondence with Gregory regarding Sixtus is not reported by Bede; an edition can be found in M Deanesly and P Grosjean, 'The Canterbury edition of the answers of Pope Gregory I to St Augustine', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 10 (1959) 1-49, at p 28-29. On the cult of St Sixtus, see also R Meens, 'A background to Augustine's mission to Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994) 5-17, at p 5-6.

²⁶ W H C Frend, 'Ecclesia Britannica: prelude or dead end?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30 (1979) 129-144, at p 129. Stancliffe, 122-123, notes that Augustine does not seem to have asked Gregory about the different methods for dating Easter in the questions he sent to him. This may also suggest that he knew little, at the time, about the British church in the west. Meens, 16-17, argued for a British Christian origin to some of the questions asked of Pope Gregory by Augustine, for example prohibitions regarding childbirth, menstruation and participation in sexual relations, which Augustine inquired about, can be found in

understandable that Gregory would have thought that the British Christians needed leadership.²⁷ His view of the British church was, therefore, in part rooted in ignorance of it. It might also have been more acceptable to Æthelberht of Kent, an imperium-wielding king, for Augustine to follow a policy of domination rather than appeasement.²⁸

That said, Augustine must at some point have learned of the British church in the independent west and sought to make contact: there must have been some formal communication made between Canterbury and the British church in Wales so that a meeting could be arranged at what appears to have been a mutually satisfactory location. An embassy to the Britons no doubt constituted part of the assistance provided to Augustine by Æthelberht, and his aid probably also extended to guaranteeing Augustine's safe passage to the meeting place in the west. But there is no reason to assume that Æthelberht held any authority over the Britons which compelled them to attend. To be sure, the British bishops and scholars were said by Bede to have been called or summoned (*convocavit*) by Augustine to the meeting, but this does not mean that they had no choice in the matter.²⁹ Indeed, the Britons seem to have come and gone as they pleased, and ultimately opposed Augustine. This behaviour is not consistent with their having been under Æthelberht's dominion.

Part of Augustine's motivation for contacting the British church in the west was a desire to extend his own authority and to bring the British clergy within the catholic fold; this is quite clear from Bede's account. But as Bede also says, Augustine sought help from the British bishops in his conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Augustine had previously appealed to Pope Gregory for assistance in his mission, complaining that he did not have the staff to prosecute the task to the full.³⁰ Gregory responded by

'Celtic' penitentials. He thus argued for British missionary activity in south-east Anglo-Saxon England and Kent. This view has been roundly rebuffed by Stancliffe, 120-121, who sources such questions to literalist views of the Hebrew Scriptures which were likely to have been promulgated by the Frankish church, and specifically Liudhard, Queen Bertha of Kent's Frankish bishop.

²⁷ It should also be allowed that in giving Augustine authority over 'all the bishops of Britain' (*omnes Britanniae sacerdotes/Britanniarum omnes episcopus*), Gregory was not solely referring to British Celtic bishops, as distinct from (say) Anglo-Saxon ones yet to be consecrated by Augustine but who would have dioceses in Britain in due course.

²⁸ Stancliffe, 137.

²⁹ Higham, 107-108, 110. C Plummer (ed), *Venerabilis Baedae: Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum, Historiam Abbatum, Epistolam ad Ecgberctum, una cum Historia Abbatum Auctore Anonymo* (Oxford, 1896) vol II, 73, had said on the basis of this passage that Æthelberht's dominion extended over the Britons as well as the Anglo-Saxons, but this is unlikely.

³⁰ See *Epistola XI.39* in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae II*, 311-313. See also Stancliffe, 123.

sending him a few more clergy in 601, including Mellitus, Iustus, Paulinus and Rufinianus;³¹ however, these reinforcements do not appear to have been adequate. It is likely, therefore, that on learning of the British church in the west, and on receiving instruction from Gregory regarding the nature of his authority over the bishops of Britain, Augustine fixed on the notion of enlisting the British church to his cause.³² This indicates that at the time of Augustine's mission, the Roman and British churches were by no means irreconcilable, and Augustine's willingness to travel across country to the west provides some sign that he genuinely expected to find common ground. But for the Britons to be considered legitimate evangelists it was necessary for them to conform to certain issues of Roman custom, such as the dating of Easter and the rite of baptism, as well as to acquiesce to Augustine's authority.³³

From Augustine's point of view, however, the colloquia were a complete failure, with the Britons refusing all of his demands. From the British side, there was probably very little reason for them to accede to Augustine's wishes, and some solid grounds for them not to. The British church in Wales had a long tradition, as compared to Augustine's see in Canterbury which at the time of the meetings had been in existence for less than a decade.³⁴ The authority of the bishop of Rome to determine the hierarchy of episcopal control in the Roman west was not fully accepted at this stage. There was also little reason for the Britons to accept the Roman Easter; the method of calculation used in Rome during the papacy of Gregory was quite possibly still based on the inferior tables of Victorius of Aquitaine, which the Britons would understandably have eschewed.³⁵ Of most significance to the independent Britons was the fact that Augustine not only came to them as a representative of the pope but also as a bishop whose very position in Britain was under the patronage of an Anglo-Saxon overlord.³⁶ To recognise Augustine as superior would have placed the

³¹ *HE* I.29.

³² Stancliffe, 124. It should be acknowledged that there is no surviving evidence that Gregory ever counselled Augustine to actively seek assistance from the Britons in his evangelisation of the Anglo-Saxons.

³³ In this sense, Augustine's requirement of the Britons to join him in catholic unity is similar to Aldhelm's appeal some 70 years later in his letter to Geraint of Dumnonia, in which he lamented over the uselessness of 'good works' if 'performed outside the Catholic Church' (*Epistola* IV, 155). Aldhelm's letter to Geraint (henceforth, *Epistola* IV) will be cited by page number from *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* trans M Lapidge and M Herren (Cambridge, 1979) 155-160.

³⁴ J Davies, *A History of Wales* (London, 1993) 77.

³⁵ K Harrison, 'A letter from Rome to the Irish clergy, AD 640', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 222-229, at p 227-229; Stancliffe, 117. The use of the Victorian tables may have persisted until John IV was consecrated pope in 640.

³⁶ Higham, 109; Stancliffe, 133.

British bishops under the control of an emissary who was aligned with a foreign king and whose see lay in a distant territory. And indeed, Æthelberht himself may even have perceived Augustine's mission as a way of extending his own dominion.³⁷ Thus, there were clear secular as well as ecclesiastical reasons for the British bishops to reject Augustine's demands.

Bede's account of the Augustine's Oak colloquia clearly reveals that the Britons refused to assist Augustine in the evangelisation of the Anglo-Saxons. This was a point to which Bede returned throughout his *Historia Ecclesiastica*,³⁸ and which formed the basis of much of his enmity towards the Britons.³⁹ On the face of it, this is a crucial point, as it suggests that the British clergy did not want to have anything to do with the Anglo-Saxons. Some recent scholarship has questioned Bede's assessment here. Clare Stancliffe, for example, argues that it was Augustine's claim of authority over the Britons that was the main 'sticking point', rather than the evangelisation of the Anglo-Saxons.⁴⁰ Her assertion is informed in part by the work of scholars such as Steven Bassett who contend that the Britons were responsible for the conversion of the Angles in the West Midlands,⁴¹ and in part by her distrust of Bede's motives.⁴² However, even if some of

³⁷ Higham, 112.

³⁸ *HE* I.22, II.2, II.20, V.22, V.23.

³⁹ On Bede's attitude to the Britons, see M Grimmer, 'Memories of the Celts in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*' 22-32 in P O'Neill (ed), *Between Intrusions: Britain and Ireland between the Romans and the Normans* (Sydney, 2004).

⁴⁰ For example, Stancliffe, 108-110, 132.

⁴¹ S Bassett, 'Churches in Worcester before and after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons', *The Antiquaries Journal* 69 (1989) 225-256; S Bassett, 'Medieval ecclesiastical organisation in the vicinity of Wroxeter and its British antecedents', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 145 (1992) 1-28; S Bassett, 'Church and diocese in the West Midlands: the transition from British to Anglo-Saxon control', 13-40 in J Blair and R Sharpe (ed), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992); S Bassett, 'How the west was won: the Anglo-Saxon takeover of the west midlands', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 11 (2000) 107-118. Bassett's conclusions are accepted by K R Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* (Leicester, 1994) 65; N Edwards, 'Identifying the archaeology of the early church in Wales and Cornwall', 49-62 in J Blair and C Pyrah (ed), *Church Archaeology: Research Directions for the Future* (London, 1996) at p 50; C A Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons A.D. 400-600* (Pennsylvania, 1998) 238-239. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 75-83, has independently mounted a similar argument, although with much more reserve than Bassett.

⁴² Stancliffe, 108-109, suggests that Bede misinterpreted the meaning of a letter of 596 sent from Pope Gregory to the Frankish kings Theuderic and Theudebert, in which he said that the 'neighbouring bishops [*sacerdotes e vicino*] ... refrain from kindling by their exhortation the desires of the English' (*Epistola* VI.49 in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Epistolae* I, 423-424). In the context of the

the details have been corrupted, there are grounds for following Bede's assessment.

It is entirely reasonable to suppose that Christianity operated as a 'rallying point' of resistance for the Britons against the Anglo-Saxons.⁴³ Their Christianity, at the time of the Roman mission, had long been established, as had their church organisation and hierarchy. Gildas, virtually our only source for the nature of British Christianity in post-Roman Britain (apart from St Patrick), assumed that the society in which he was writing was Christian, and his chastisement of the British rulers of his day did not include paganism as one of their sins.⁴⁴ If this had been an issue, Gildas would surely have mentioned it. For Gildas, his complaint was principally that the British kings did not measure up to Christian ideals and standards, and by his tacit assumption that they should have, the impression to be gained is that the church was a well-entrenched part of society.⁴⁵ In his *De Excidio Britanniae*, Gildas wrote of a hierarchy of bishops (*episcopi*), priests (*presbyteri*) and deacons (*diaconi*)⁴⁶ – although there is no mention of archbishops or metropolitans – and of a budding

letter, Gregory was probably referring to neighbouring Frankish bishops who refused to aid in converting the Anglo-Saxons. However, Stancliffe argues that Bede would have read this as referring to British bishops, and goes on to assert that this is the origin of his conviction that the British never assisted in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Perhaps this explains her otherwise inexplicable statement at p 132: 'As far as we can tell from Bede's account, the evangelisation of the Anglo-Saxons was not a sticking point for them [ie the Britons]' (emphasis added). Bede does not refer to Gregory's letter in his *HE*, and it is by no means clear that he read it; so Stancliffe's argument is highly conjectural.

⁴³ L Quensel von-Kalben, 'The British church and the emergence of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 10 (1999) 89-97, at p 95.

⁴⁴ *DEB* 27-36. In a similar vein, St Patrick's complaint against some of his fellow Britons, such as Coroticus, was that they were rebel Christians and apostates, not that they were pagans (*Confessio* 1-2; *Epistola* 2, 15, 19). St Patrick's *Confessio* and *Epistola* will be cited by subsection from *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchú's 'Life'* ed and trans A B E Hood (London, 1978). On this point, see also D N Dumville, 'The idea of government in sub-Roman Britain' 177-216 in G Ausenda (ed), *After Empire: Towards an Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians* (Woodbridge, 1995) at p 196.

⁴⁵ Dumville 'The idea of government in sub-Roman Britain', 195. B Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995) 158, reasons that the British church must have been sufficiently well established for it to become as corrupt as Gildas complains.

⁴⁶ *DEB* 65.1, 66.1, 67.1-4, 109.2. Gildas also refers to *sacerdotes* – a term which can embrace both *presbyteri* and *episcopi* – as well as *clerici*, *pastores*, *ecclesiastici*, *ministri* and so forth. It is worth noting that St Patrick (*Confessio* 1, 26, 32; *Epistola* 1) was a bishop (*episcopus*) and one of his grandfathers a priest (*presbyter*).

monastic culture.⁴⁷ The sophistication of Gildas's prose style suggests the availability of some form of classical education, as well as others who were able to read and appreciate what he wrote.⁴⁸ Christianity, therefore, was an established part of the Britons' identity, and would have informed the self-perception of the Britons, seen by Gildas as the people of a 'latter-day Israel', versus the Anglo-Saxons who were 'hated by God'.⁴⁹

In addition, there was some history of hostility in ecclesiastical quarters against the Anglo-Saxons as evidenced, for example, by St Germanus of Auxerre rallying a group of Romano-Britons against an Anglo-Saxon enemy, which resulted in the 'Hallelujah victory'.⁵⁰ The dearth of British clerics in eastern Britain also suggests, whatever view is taken of the nature of the Anglo-Saxon invasion, that the British church was disrupted, perhaps with clergy fleeing west to inform their brethren of the calamity in the east.⁵¹ In this context, it is quite understandable that the organised British church in the west would have refused to share their Christianity with the Anglo-Saxons; they were not only an enemy but also a barbarian people who did not deserve the grace of baptism. Indeed, Peter

⁴⁷ D N Dumville, 'The origins and early history of insular monasticism: aspects of literature, Christianity, and society in Britain and Ireland, A.D. 400-600', *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University*, 30 (1997) 85-107; M Herren, 'Gildas and early British monasticism', 65-78 in A Bammesberger and A Wollmann (ed), *Britain 400-600: Language and History* (Heidelberg, 1990) at p 71-76; C Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (Berkeley, 1981) 348. For the characteristics of British Christianity which can be gleaned from Gildas and Patrick, see W H Davies, 'The church in Wales', 131-150 in M W Barley and R P C Hanson (ed), *Christianity in Britain, 300-700* (Leicester, 1968); Frend 131; Snyder, 123-124.

⁴⁸ M Lapidge, 'Gildas's education and the Latin culture of sub-Roman Britain', 27-50 in M Lapidge and D N Dumville (ed), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984) at p 40-48; Stancliffe, 116.

⁴⁹ *DEB* 23.1, 26.1. See also Higham, 109, and even Stancliffe, 139, who do appear to concede this point.

⁵⁰ Constantius of Lyon, *Vita Sancti Germani* 16. The *Vita Sancti Germani* is cited by section from *Acta Sanctorum* ed J Bollandus (Bruxelles, 1965) July vii. The 'Hallelujah victory' is also recorded by Bede (*HE*, I.20). See also S Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints* (Edinburgh, 1914) VIII July pt ii, 681-697; E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1984) 39-46.

⁵¹ von-Kalben, 95; Stancliffe, 118-119. Comparison could be made here with Stephen of Ripon's statement in his *Life of Wilfrid* (*Vita Wilfridi* 17) regarding the desertion of monastic communities by British clergy in Northumbria: 'the consecrated places in various parts [*diversis regionibus*] which the British clergy [*clerus Bryttannus*] had deserted when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation [*aciem gladii hostilis manu gentis*]'. *Vita Wilfridi* is cited by chapter number from *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus: Text, Translation and Notes* ed and trans B Colgrave (Cambridge, 1927).

Brown has stated that this should not have been surprising in post-Roman Britain, because ‘most old-fashioned *Romani* [and indeed Romano-Britons] still felt that Christianity was too precious a thing to waste on mere barbarians’.⁵² Thus, the Britons should not have been greatly concerned that the Anglo-Saxons remained pagan, nor have been particularly interested in converting them.⁵³ Gildas also presented the Anglo-Saxons as being God’s punishment of the corrupt Britons,⁵⁴ and there is some question as to whether the British clergy would have even considered evangelising such a people. As Ian Wood asks, ‘How can one think about evangelising the scourge of God?’⁵⁵ Bede may indeed have skewed his account of the Britons and their Christianity, but, as Patrick Sims-Williams states, ‘the story [Bede presents] would have strained credulity had the Welsh bishops been known to have preached to their [Anglo-Saxon] neighbours across the Severn in a concerted manner’.⁵⁶

It appears, therefore, that the British bishops refused to cooperate with Augustine’s Roman mission on all counts, which would have served to lay the foundations for a division between the two ecclesiastical traditions. Evidence for the separateness of the British church from the Anglo-Saxons reappears and is reinforced in other seventh-century sources. Soon after Augustine’s death, his successor Laurentius made further overtures to the British bishops. Bede says that Laurentius and his fellow-bishops, Mellitus and Iustus, sent a letter to the Britons, c 605-610, ‘striving to bring them into Catholic unity’.⁵⁷ This was apparently not successful, as indicated by Bede’s reference to the lamentable ‘present state of affairs’ regarding the Britons. In the same chapter, Bede reports that Laurentius and his fellow-bishops also sent a letter to the bishops and abbots of the Irish in which they complained that, when they were visited by the Irish Bishop Dagán, he ‘refused to take food, not only with us but even in the very house where we

⁵² P Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000* (Massachusetts, 1997) 81. See also E A Thompson, ‘Christianity and the northern barbarians’, 56-78 in A Momigliano (ed), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity, in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963) at p 61-64, 76-77; L Musset, *The Germanic Invasions: The Making of Europe AD 400-600* (London, 1975) 178-179.

⁵³ St Patrick’s *Confessio*, in this regard, can also be interpreted as an *apologia* for his mission to the Irish, at a time when it was not considered appropriate to convert ‘enemies who do not know God’ (*Confessio* 46). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing this analogy to my attention.

⁵⁴ Eg *DEB* 24.1.

⁵⁵ Cited in Dumville, ‘The idea of government in sub-Roman Britain’, 215.

⁵⁶ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 78.

⁵⁷ *HE* II.4.

took our meals'. Although this is an account of an Irish churchman, Dagán's snub is presented as also being indicative of British attitudes.⁵⁸

Aldhelm's letter to Geraint of Dumnonia, written c 672, provides a similar picture of British separateness, and one which appears particularly extreme in Wales.⁵⁹ The main thrust of Aldhelm's letter was to exhort Geraint to instruct his bishops to follow catholic practice, and he voiced a concern for the two principal 'errors' of Celtic practice that also preoccupied Bede, namely the style of the tonsure and the calculation of the date of Easter.⁶⁰ However, Aldhelm draws a distinction between the British Christians of Dumnonia and those across the Severn strait in Dyfed. The bishops of Dyfed were said to 'glory in the private purity of their own way of life', and to 'not deign to admit us [ie Roman clergy] to the company of their brotherhood until we have been compelled to spend the space of forty days in penance'.⁶¹ It is not clear if the behaviour of these bishops was characteristic of all of Wales; nevertheless, Aldhelm's evidence supports a picture of British Christians still desiring to hold themselves in isolation from the Anglo-Saxons. And irrespective of whether the bishops of Dyfed disdained the Anglo-Saxons out of ascetic fanaticism as has been claimed,⁶² rather than ethnic discord, the salient point is that Aldhelm clearly believed that they were antagonistic to the Roman church of the Anglo-Saxons. Thus, an attitude of animosity between British and Anglo-Saxon clergy was in evidence. Further, Aldhelm's letter would have conveyed such an impression to anyone who read it, or indeed heard him speak on the

⁵⁸ It is interesting to consider that St Patrick's *Epistola* similarly contains a proscription against taking food or drink with the censured Coroticus and his soldiers (*Epistola* 7). In addition, it should be pointed out that Bede was by no means universally negative in his view of the Irish, who were, after all, largely responsible for the foundation of the church in Northumbria: see Grimmer, 'Memories of the Celts', 22-32.

⁵⁹ Aldhelm, *Epistola* IV, 155-160. For a discussion of Aldhelm's letter to Geraint, and its implications for ecclesiastical interaction between the Anglo-Saxons and Britons, see M Grimmer, 'Saxon bishop and Celtic king: interactions between Aldhelm of Wessex and Geraint of Dumnonia', *The Heroic Age* 4 (2001): available online at *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* <http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/4/Grimmer.html> [30 April 2006].

⁶⁰ Aldhelm, *Epistola* IV, 156-157.

⁶¹ Aldhelm, *Epistola* IV, 158.

⁶² See Stancliffe, 110, 117, who argues that it was the Roman clerics' sinfulness as worldly clerics rather than their different Christian tradition or ethnicity which mattered to the British monks. The asceticism of some British monasteries is remarked upon by Gildas in what survives of one of his lost letters (*Fragmenta Epistolae* 3). The letter is cited by number from *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and other Works*, 80-81, 143-144. See also Herren, 76-77; Snyder, 45.

matter.⁶³ His reference to the British form of monasticism as ‘a life of contemplative retirement away in some squalid wilderness’ would scarcely have encouraged a positive attitude towards British Christianity.⁶⁴

It would be erroneous, nevertheless, to insist that there was no interaction between the British church of Wales and the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century. The fact that Aldhelm could report that Roman clergy were not accepted into the company of the brethren in Dyfed obviously indicates that some contact must have been attempted. Perhaps there were further entreaties to conform to Roman practice, offered in the same vein as Aldhelm’s letter to Geraint. The consecration of Chad in c 655 by Bishop Wine of Wessex, ‘with the assistance of two bishops of the British, who ... keep Easter Sunday, according to their rule’,⁶⁵ further tells of interaction between British and Anglo-Saxon Christians. And indeed, a level of cordiality is suggested; they would hardly have shared in administering the rite of consecration if they were hostile to one another.⁶⁶ That this affair involved Wine of Wessex does suggest that the British bishops may have been from Dumnonia rather than Wales. This would be consistent with Aldhelm’s account which implies that the Britons of Dyfed in south-western Wales, at least, were more antagonistic to Roman practice than the Dumnonians.

Notwithstanding these examples, there survives little evidence for institutional interaction between the British church and the Anglo-Saxon church for much of the seventh century. Christian influence from Wales in the conversion of the Angles in the West Midlands is possible, but the sources are silent on the matter.⁶⁷ By Bede’s time in the early eighth century, the view was clearly one of mutual suspicion between the two churches. Felix’s *Life of St Guthlac*, written contemporaneously with

⁶³ Bede referred to the letter (*HE*, V.18), although he appears to have misunderstood its origin and nature. He assumed that it was a book, seemed to think it was the result of a local synod, and did not mention that it was addressed specifically to Geraint. Thus, Bede may not have actually seen it. Cf Stancliffe, 110, 141, who argues that Bede had read the letter.

⁶⁴ Aldhelm, *Epistola IV*, 156.

⁶⁵ *HE* III.28.

⁶⁶ There are any number of speculations which can be made regarding the motives of these British bishops who assisted Wine. Perhaps they saw their involvement as a possible avenue for influencing the West Saxon church. Alternatively, if they were from Dumnonia, the Britons may have hoped to pacify the expansionist West Saxons by showing charity to their beleaguered bishop. Or it may even have been that the British bishops were pressed into service.

⁶⁷ Loyn, 31; K Ray, ‘Archaeology and the three early churches of Herefordshire’ 99-148 in A Malpas *et al* (ed), *The Early Church in Herefordshire: Proceedings of a Conference held in Leominster in June 2000* (Leominster, 2001) at p 109; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 77. This includes the Welsh sources, such as they are.

Bede's great work,⁶⁸ would similarly have promoted a negative view of the Britons. The *Life* contains an account of the saint being assailed by demons disguised as a host of Britons, thus equating them with evil.⁶⁹ In this passage, Felix also refers to their speech as 'sibilant' (*strimulentas*), or 'barbarous' (*barbaras*). These statements reveal a continuing dislike of Britons, as well as a sense of superiority over them. Though the Britons were Christian, their non-compliance with Roman custom meant that they could still be employed by Anglo-Saxon hagiographers and historians as representatives of the devil.⁷⁰

The Augustine's Oak conferences were a defining moment in terms of relations between the British church and the new Roman church of the Anglo-Saxons. The meetings saw the Britons clearly identified as schismatic, and established a pattern of distrust and isolation which characterised institutional relations for the rest of the seventh and much of the eighth century.⁷¹ The British bishops were doubtless also influenced by the growing asceticism in the British church, which may have underlined a self-perception of separateness from the more worldly church of the Romans.⁷² Nevertheless, from the arrival of Augustine until when Bede was compiling his *Historia Ecclesiastica* and beyond, the British church hierarchy seems to have remained opposed to the Anglo-Saxon church.⁷³ Thus, Bede felt able to declare, in the penultimate chapter of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, in his partisan fashion, that the Britons 'for the most part ... oppose the English through their inbred hatred' (*quamvis et maxima ex*

⁶⁸ M Lapidge, 'Felix' 181 in M Lapidge *et al* (ed), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1999); J Roberts, 'Hagiography and literature: the case of Guthlac of Crowland' 69-86 in M P Brown and C A Farr (ed), *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001) at pp 69-70. The work was commissioned by Ælfrwald of the East Angles (713-749).

⁶⁹ *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, 34. Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* is cited by chapter number from *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac: Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes* ed B Colgrave (Cambridge, 1956).

⁷⁰ D Banham, 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes: in search of the origins of English racism', *European Review of History* 1 (1994) 143-156, at p 148.

⁷¹ It was Sir John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales* (London, 1939) vol I, 194, who described the seventh and eighth centuries as 'the Age of Isolation' in Welsh history.

⁷² See note 62.

⁷³ It is generally accepted that the Britons of Wales finally capitulated and conformed to the Roman Easter in the 760s. This is attested only in *Annales Cambriae*, in which it is recorded under the year 768 that 'Easter is changed among the Britons ... Elfoddw, man of God, emending it' (*Pasca commutatur apud Brittones ... emendante Elbodugo homine Dei*): AC 768. This Elfoddw is said under his obit to have been 'archbishop of Gwynedd' (*archiepiscopus Guenedotae regione*): AC 809. However, apart from these references, the capitulation is an otherwise obscure event for which no detail survives.

parte domestico sibi odio gentem Anglorum inpugnent).⁷⁴ The publication of his work would have further popularised the attitudes that he reported.

⁷⁴ *HE V.23.*