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Pagans, Christians, and 'the Barbarian Conspiracy' of A.D. 367 in Roman Britain*

By W.H.C. FREND

The contrasting fortunes of Christianity in Britain and on the Continent in the late fourth and fifth centuries are one of the truisms of history.¹ Why did Roman Britain fail to follow the example of other provinces in the West and preserve a powerful and episcopally-led Christian Church, so that despite the destruction wrought by the barbarian invasions the continuity between Roman province and Germanic kingdom could be maintained? Why, alone among the western provinces, did Catholic Christianity have to be replanted in an almost wholly pagan environment whence all records of previous Christianisation appear to have perished?

The questions are worth asking, since for a long period in the fourth century Christianity in Britain appeared to be following a similar course to that in Roman provinces on the Continent, especially northern Gaul. In both, the new religion had probably been introduced either through merchants from the eastern Mediterranean or through garrison troops, but progress had been slow.² At the Council of Arles in August 314, the first general council in the West, Roman Britain was rather better represented than Gaul north of the Loire. There were three bishops, from London, York, and Colchester (?)³ respectively, compared with a sole Bishop of Rouen.⁴ There was no bishop from Paris, Tours, Orléans or Soissons, all of which sees were to become prominent during the century. In both areas the Church can be seen as a small body of believers concentrated in urban communities and governed as elsewhere by a hierarchy led by a bishop. It was of little consequence in the general life of the province.

Down to the end of the reign of Constantius II (361) the impression gained is that the Church in Britain, though poorer and less well-organised than its Gallic neighbour, was continuing to progress. It was also firmly orthodox. In Gaul the Council of Cologne in 346

* I would like to thank K.S. Painter and M.E. Henig for helpful advice in preparing this article which was read as a paper at the XIth International Conference on Patristic Studies at Oxford, 19–24 August 1991.

¹ The standard work on Christianity in Roman Britain is C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (1981), also W.H.C. Frend, 'Ecclesia Britannica: prelude or dead end?', *Journ. Ecclesiastical Hist.* (= *JEH*) xxx (1979), 129–44.

² See W.H.C. Frend, 'A note on the influence of Greek immigrants on the spread of Christianity in the West', *Mullus* (Festsch. Th. Klauser) = *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, Ergänzungsband i (1964), 125–9, and for the martyrdom of Aaron and Julius at the legionary fortress of Caerleon, Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* 1.7.

³ See J.C. Mann, 'The administration of Roman Britain', *Antiquity* xxxv (1961), 316–20.

⁴ See J. Gaudemet, *Conciles gaulois du IVe siècle*, Sources chrétiennes 241 (1977), 35–67 (Episcopal list, pp. 57–63).

shows Christianity taking root in Amiens, Sens, Soissons, and Orléans, whose bishops were added to that of Rouen.⁵ There is no similar direct evidence for episcopal expansion in Britain, but at the western Council of Serdica in 342/343, the British Church was among those recorded as being loyal to the Creed of Nicaea and demanding the return of Athanasius to his see of Alexandria.⁶ It was also praised by Hilary of Poitiers as an ally of the Gallic Churches in the same cause in 358.⁷ At the Council of Ariminum in the summer of 359 the British bishops joined with their other western colleagues in resisting the emperor's attempt to impose a non-Nicene (arianising) creed on them. Three British bishops – it is not stated that these were the only Britons present – accepted the emperor's offer of paying their return expenses on the imperial posting service from treasury funds. Their action, though criticised by some, was defended by others on the grounds that their poverty was real.⁸

The impression of general impoverishment at this time may need correction if one accepts archaeological evidence as more representative of the state of the Church as a whole. The major discoveries from Roman villas, small towns, or in the form of hoards suggesting relative wealth among the Christians, all seem to date roughly to the period 330–360. The most striking example is the Water Newton treasure.⁹ This superb collection of Romano-British Christian silver, probably a large part of an altar Communion set, accompanied by votive ornaments, was found by a perceptive amateur in 1975. The *pièce de résistance* is a beautiful plain two-handled silver goblet which must be an Eucharistic chalice, the first ever found in the western provinces of the Empire, and belonging to a wealthy Christian community.¹⁰ This would be suggested further by the silver bowls donated by 'Viventia and Innocentia' and other personal benefactors.¹¹ The use of the phrase *Sanctum altare tuum, Domine, subnixus honoro*, written in a dactylic hexameter inscribed on a bowl given by a certain Publianus, indicates familiarity with a sophisticated liturgy. The translation reads: 'O Lord, I Publianus, leaning upon you (or prostrating myself) honour your sacred altar'. Prostration at the Introit or greeting the altar with a kiss perhaps links this liturgy with eastern models.¹² Other votive objects, however, particularly the numerous triangular feather pattern plaques, differ only from similar objects found in Romano-Celtic temples by the presence of a Chi-Rho instead of the symbol of a Celtic god.¹³ Taken as it stands, this might suggest that the Church in this community was tending to absorb current pagan usage rather than to confront and destroy it.

The date of the objects forming the Water Newton treasure has been placed in the period before 350, half a century earlier therefore than the looted treasures found at Traprain Law

⁵ *ibid.*, 70–9. The Council condemned the alleged arianising statements of Eufhrasius, Bishop of Cologne (Colonia Agrippinensis). The existence of this Council has been challenged by some scholars.

⁶ Quoted by Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 28 (P.G. 25, col. 728).

⁷ Hilary, *De Synodis* 1, good evidence for the Church in Britain being effective at this time (PL.10, 479).

⁸ Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicon* (ed. Halm, CSEL. i) II. 41.

⁹ K.S. Painter, *The Water Newton Early Christian Silver* (1977). For identification as an altar set see W.H.C. Frend, 'Syrian parallels to the Water Newton treasure?', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* xxvii–xxviii (1984–5), 146–50.

¹⁰ Painter, *op. cit.* (note 9), pl. 6. (p. 30).

¹¹ *ibid.*, 14.

¹² *ibid.*, 15–16.

¹³ *ibid.*, pl. 10, 13–27. For similar silver leaves or 'feathers' from a pagan shrine at Cavenham (Suffolk) see N.F. Layard, *Antiq. Journ.* vi (1925), 258–65, and figs 4 and 5 and a gold votive leaf from Stonea, T.W. Potter, *Britannia* xii (1981), fig. 10.1.

or Coleraine.¹⁴ It was buried as a single collection, carefully packed around a large silver dish (paten?) whether by Christians or by robbers.¹⁵

Another great Christian treasure from Mildenhall, some 40 miles east, was found because it also was buried hurriedly as a single collection in a shallow hole.¹⁶ It shares some characteristics of Water Newton in that the pagan-Christian theme is a dominating one. This is exemplified by the magnificent Oceanus dish, the central feature of which is a mask of the god surrounded by a figure-scene of Nereids revelling with sea-centaurs and marine beasts, and on the outer frieze a scene depicting the triumph of Bacchus over Hercules, almost a defiant gesture of a victory of the wayward over the good! But accompanying this and other vessels decorated with equally pagan Dionysian scenes are silver spoons, three of which are inscribed with the Christian Chi-Rho monogram and two others with possibly Christian acclamations. The goblets also and the ladles could have had a Christian, liturgical, use in the celebration of the Eucharist. At this period the combination of pagan and Christian elements in a single treasure suggests a Christian owner of great wealth who nonetheless accepted the reality of traditional religious motives, especially when expressed on objects of beauty. The date of the presence of the silver objects in Britain is suggested as 'in or about A.D. 361', if the original owner was the eunuch Eutherius, the Armenian *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, who was attached to Julian's court in Gaul in 355, but left for the East with him in 361, when the collection may have passed to the general Lupicinus.¹⁷

The message of these two hoards, together with another East of England treasure, from Thetford,¹⁸ is that in the 340s–350s some Christian communities and individuals were wealthy, but that their Christianity was a religion that was taking its place among other religious traditions of Britain. The parallel provided by the outlook of the contemporary Gallic poet, Ausonius, comes to mind.¹⁹

A similar story is repeated on the mosaics from the villas of Hinton St. Mary and Frampton.²⁰ It has been suggested that both come from a single manufactory, the 'Durnovarian School', centred on Roman Dorchester and dated to 325–340.²¹ Both

¹⁴ Painter, *op. cit.* (note 9), 21, 'perhaps in the earlier rather than the later part of that (the fourth) century'. The Traprain Law and the Coleraine treasures both included silver coins of Honorius (395–423).

¹⁵ The only suggestion of robbers is that the handles of the chalice have been detached, and the damaged chalice could not be used in the liturgy. The second Water Newton hoard, consisting of thirty gold coins and two pieces of folded silver plate could have been buried as early as 350; see C.M. Johns and R. Carson, 'The Water Newton hoard', *Durobrivae* iii (1975), 10–12. Were both hoards the result of the same set of circumstances, either c. 350 or, as seems possible, the insecurity of the years 367–369?

¹⁶ For Mildenhall, see J.W. Brailsford, *The Mildenhall Treasure* (1947) and K.S. Painter, 'The Mildenhall Treasure; a reconsideration', *British Museum Quarterly* (= *BMQ*) xxxvii (1973), 154–80. My description follows Painter's.

¹⁷ Painter, *op. cit.* (note 16), 170. Painter suggests (171–2) that the treasure may have come into the hands of Lupicinus *magister equitum per Gallias* in c. 360. His Christianity, however, may have made him suspect to Julian and the treasure in consequence buried by his family when he returned to Gaul from Britain after Julian became Augustus.

¹⁸ Discussed by C.M. Johns and T.W. Potter, *The Thetford Treasure: Roman Jewellery and Silver* (1983) and D.J. Watts, 'The Thetford treasure: a reappraisal', *Antiq. Journ.* lxxviii (1988), 55–68. The suggestion, however, on p. 56 that the treasure might have belonged to 'a small group of disaffected Christians who renounced their faith after the death of Constantius and founded their own exclusive cult of the god Faunus', needs further research, but the Christian element in the collection cannot be ignored.

¹⁹ See H. Isbell, 'Decimus Magnus Ausonius; the poet and his world', in J.W. Binns (ed.), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (1974), 22–57.

²⁰ K.S. Painter, 'Villas and Christianity in Roman Britain', *BMQ* xxxv (1971), 156–75, and J.M.C. Toynbee, 'A new Roman pavement found in Dorset', *JRS* liv (1964), 7–14.

²¹ D.J. Smith, 'Three fourth-century schools of mosaic in Roman Britain', *La mosaïque gréco-romaine*, CNRS (1965), 101–2.

mosaics, though Christian, show a high degree of adaptation and absorption of traditional religious ideas. The central figure of Christ at Hinton St. Mary²² and the Chi-Rho at Frampton²³ form part of a wider ornamental design that included, at Hinton St. Mary, the Four Seasons, a scene derived from classical hunting scenes, and the slaying of the Chimera by Bellerophon. This last-mentioned motive also found its place at Lullingstone where the house-church seems to have come into being about A.D. 360.²⁴ Many of these traditional motives had, however, by now acquired possible Christian interpretations.²⁵ So long as Christianity remained the religion of the emperor and many of his higher officials these interpretations could be expected to prevail.²⁶

While the House of Constantine ruled, Christianity advanced in town and countryside. The Silchester church is remarkable, as even at this period churches still tended to be located in the cemetery area outside the towns where Christians often had had their first meeting-places. But 'a decade either side of 350', to quote a recent thorough examination of the evidence,²⁷ the small basilican-type church had been built on apparently long-disused land south of the forum, the sort of position where on the Continent in the early fifth century a cathedral might have been expected to arise. The Silchester church is, in this respect, unique for the period, though a parallel may emerge if the building beneath St Paul-in-the-Bail at Lincoln proves to be a church.²⁸

More significant for the general spread of Christianity in Britain in the reign of Constantius II are the circular lead tanks marked with a plain Chi-Rho, nearly all found in eastern and southern England.²⁹ Whether they were used for a ceremony of foot-washing or, more likely, as baptismal fonts their presence in a number of small centres, such as Ashton,³⁰ Icklingham³¹ or Pulborough³² indicates the development of Christianity beyond the walls of major centres or the wealthy families of villa-owners. The Walesby (Lin-

²² Toynbee, *op. cit.* (note 20), pl. II. Also, K.S. Painter, 'The design of the Roman mosaic at Hinton St. Mary', *Antiq. Journ.* lvi (1976), 49–54.

²³ Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 104–5, 181–3.

²⁴ G.W. Meates, *The Lullingstone Roman Villa* (1955), 146, and for the dating 'post-354', see B.W. Pearce, Appendix iv, in G.W. Meates *et al.*, *Arch. Cant.* lxxv (1952), 68. In his final report Meates places the Christian use of the northern rooms in the villa from 360–420 (*The Roman Villa at Lullingstone, Kent* (1979), 42) while suggesting the consecration of the Christian house-church dated to 380–385 (p. 38). It would seem also that pagan ritual continued in some form along with Christian worship (p. 39). The plain Chi-Rho monogram suggests, however, that the earlier date first suggested by Meates is more likely to be correct. The six standing figures beneath the colonnade in the frieze on the west wall of the Christian chapel might even be Apostles, set off against a similar representative group on the east wall. 'Government officials or army officers' (*Lullingstone II* (1987), 41) seems less likely, though not impossible.

²⁵ See M. Simon, 'Bellérophon chrétien', *Mélanges J. Carcopino* (1966), 899–904 and J.M.C. Toynbee, 'The Christian Roman mosaic, Hinton St. Mary, Dorset', *Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. and Antiq. Soc.* lxxxv (1964), 116–21. For a similar 'christianisation' of the Dionysiac cult at this period, see Painter, *op. cit.* (note 20), 162–3.

²⁶ For the religious policy of Constantius II, see W.H.C. Friend, 'The Church in the reign of Constantius II: mission, monasticism, worship', and T.D. Barnes, 'Christians and Pagans in the reign of Constantius II', in A. Dihle (ed.), *L'Église et l'empire au IV^e siècle* (1979), 73–112, 301–44.

²⁷ S.S. Frere, 'The Silchester church, the excavations by Sir Ian Richmond in 1956–61', *Archaeologia* cv (1976), 277–302, esp. 297. This identification has been questioned by A.C. King, 'The Roman church at Silchester reconsidered', *Oxford Journ. Arch.* xi.2 (1983), 225–37, without, however, a credible alternative being suggested.

²⁸ Research by Michael Jones whose publication is forthcoming.

²⁹ See D.J. Watts, 'Circular lead tanks and their significance for Romano-British Christianity', *Antiq. Journ.* lxxviii (1988), 210–22; C.J. Guy, 'Roman circular lead tanks in Britain', *Britannia* xii (1981), 271–6, and Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 122–4.

³⁰ C.J. Guy, 'The lead tank from Ashton', *Durobrivae* v (1977), 10–11.

³¹ S.C. West, 'The Roman site at Icklingham', *East Anglian Arch.* iii (1976), 63–126.

³² Watts, *op. cit.* (note 29), fig. 1d., and C.E. Curwen, 'Roman lead cistern from Pulborough, Sussex', *Antiq. Journ.* xxiii (1943), 155–7.

colnshire) tank illustrating part of what must be scenes from an adult female baptism is itself evidence of Christian advance into rural areas, especially in eastern Britain.³³ The plain, unembellished Chi-Rho monogram lends substance to the suggestion of 'perhaps early to mid-fourth-century' date.³⁴ Finally, cemeteries that combine absence of grave-goods with east-west orientation, such as at Poundbury outside Dorchester,³⁵ and possibly Lankhills (Winchester),³⁶ indicate growing urban Christian communities. At some date, the writer of the graffito in fourth-century cursive from Bath could feel justified in referring to 'Pagan and Christian whatever . . . ' as representing two faiths recognisably of equal standing.³⁷

Constantius II had forbidden pagan sacrifices on pain of death³⁸ and lavished privileges on the Christian clergy.³⁹ So far as he was concerned, Christianity was the religion of the Empire. In February 360, however, his Caesar, Julian, bowed to the demands of his troops in Paris and accepted the title of emperor. Constantius never regained control of the West, and with Julian's triumph in 361 the privileged status of the Church lapsed. Though Julian's fervid attempt to restore paganism to its former status died with him (26 June 363), his successor, Valentinian I (364–375) did not return to the status quo under Constantius. While a convinced Christian himself, he was determined to pursue a policy of toleration for all faiths, except the Manichees, whom he regarded as obscene pests. His reign, Ammianus says, 'was distinguished by toleration in that he remained neutral in religious differences, neither troubling anyone on that ground nor ordering him to reverence this or that'.⁴⁰ This neutrality in fact worked in favour of the restoration of Nicene orthodoxy in the West, and did not impede the progress of Christianity on the Continent. Thus regarding Gaul, Hilary of Poitiers wrote c. 365 'every day the believing people increases and professions of faith are multiplied. Pagan superstitions are abandoned together with the impious fables of mythology, and the altars of demons and the vanity of idols. Everyone is moving along the road to salvation'.⁴¹

Twenty years later Martin of Tours delivered a massive and decisive blow at paganism in northern Gaul. Strong-arm methods were used to destroy temples and cut down sacred groves.⁴² The rustic populations he encountered were converted by the apparent all-power of Martin's god. Paganism did not revive in the form of organised cult. The success of his mission can be demonstrated not only by evidence for the destruction of many Romano-Celtic temples in Normandy c. 380,⁴³ but by the positive evidence of the hold that the Church there was now exerting in Rouen and surroundings. Bishop Victricius' career (c. 390–410) provides convincing proof. This ex-soldier turned Bishop of Rouen brought drive

³³ Described by Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 221–5.

³⁴ Watts, *op. cit.* (note 29), 215. Coins of Valentinian I were found with the two tanks from Bourton-on-the-Water, *ibid.*

³⁵ C.J.G. Green, 'A cemetery of a Romano-British Christian community at Poundbury, Dorchester, Dorset', in S.M. Pearce (ed.), *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland*, BAR 102 (1980), 61–76. Ashton may be another Christian cemetery. Personal observation, however, while working there in November 1984 was of the careful burial of bodies lying extended on their back without grave-goods, but oriented roughly north–south.

³⁶ G. Clarke (ed.), *Pre-Roman and Roman Winchester*, Part ii, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills* (1979). Discussed by Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 234–5.

³⁷ Thus, Joyce Reynolds in a review-article, suggesting that among the lower classes Christians and pagans were 'rubbing along together' (*Britannia* xxi (1990), 382).

³⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* xvi. 10. 6. (ban on sacrifices).

³⁹ Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* v.5.1–3 (summary of privileges removed by Julian), and see T.G. Elliott, 'The tax exemptions granted to clerics by Constantine and Constantius ii', *Phoenix* 32 (1978), 326–36.

⁴⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus xxx. 9. 5.

⁴¹ Hilary, *Homilies on the Psalms* 67, 20. (ed. C. Zingerle, *CSEL* xxii, 215).

⁴² Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Sancti Martini* 13. 'Crowds of pagan rustics' came to believe in Christ.

⁴³ L. de Vesly, *Les Fana ou les petits temples gallo-romains de la région normande* (1909), 78 and 193.

and imagination to the administration of his see. A letter from his friend Paulinus of Nola (c. 400)⁴⁴ praises him for populating former deserted areas covered with forests with churches and monasteries, and in particular, for his successful mission among the Nervii, a tribe inhabiting the 'remote' (Channel) shore. Christ was at work among all the Gallic peoples and Rouen itself could be compared to Jerusalem on account of its Christian devotion. Paulinus' style is flowery and rhetorical and he had little idea of northern Gaul or the tribes dwelling along the Channel coast, but his praise is echoed in a second contemporary document, Victricius' *De Laude Sanctorum*. 'Look what a throng', he writes, 'of the heavenly army deigns to come to our city so that our habitation may be among the legion of saints and the great powers of heaven'.⁴⁵ The citizens of Rouen turned out to welcome the arrival of martyrs' relics as if to welcome the visit of the emperor or a high imperial official. Christianity cemented by the cult of relics and martyrs had displaced the Romano-Celtic cults as the religion of the people of northern Gaul. Indeed, over much of the western Roman world in the decade or so immediately preceding the great barbarian onset of the years following 407, the early Christian church displaced effectively the pagan temple as the hall-mark of popular religion.⁴⁶

In c. 396, Victricius visited Britain. There he met a council of British bishops to discuss some unspecified problems of interest both to the Gallic and British Churches.⁴⁷ The visit indicates therefore that close relations existed between the Church in southern Britain and northern Gaul. Yet the evangelising spirit of the latter had evidently not extended to Britain and Victricius may have found a contrast between what he experienced there and what he had left behind at Rouen. Though Britain could claim the cult of St Alban and perhaps of other unnamed martyrs,⁴⁸ the only recorded missionary activity, that of Ninian, a disciple of Martin, was far away astride Hadrian's Wall.⁴⁹ Neither the names of bishops Victricius met, nor monasteries, nor any sign of popular religious fervour have been recorded during these years. When one looks for evidence of early Christian churches below the sites of mediaeval cathedrals such as occur in Italian towns, or, north of the Alps at Geneva, one has to be content with possibilities rather than certainties.⁵⁰ Above all, no Christian parish system was emerging in the wake of a destruction of rural paganism. Even in Silchester, there is little evidence for Christian activity and the final period of the church was squatter occupation beginning probably not much later than c. 370.⁵¹

How was it then that after a period of promise in the 340s–350s, the Church apparently

⁴⁴ Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* xviii. 4 (ed. G. de Hartel, *CSEL* xxix. 131).

⁴⁵ Victricius, *De Laude Sanctorum* 1.1 (*Corpus Christianorum* Ser. Lat. lxiv, 69) and compare *ibid.*, 2 (two celebrations at Rouen).

⁴⁶ See in particular, the numerous examples quoted in the *Actes du XIe Congrès internationale d'archéologie chrétienne* (1989), vols 2 and 3.

⁴⁷ Victricius, *De Laude Sanctorum* 1.2. Evidently to perform some tasks that concerned the Gallic Churches as well as the British. 'Nam quod ad Britannias profectus sum, quod ibi moratus sum, vestrorum fecit exsecutio praeceptorum'. Perhaps relating to the possible transport of martyrs 'relics to Britain' (suggested by the Editor, *PL*.20, 443) or some theological controversy (Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 53).

⁴⁸ See K.S. Painter, 'Recent discoveries in Britain', in *op. cit.* (note 46), 2037 and figs 5 and 6 for possible martyrs found at Wells.

⁴⁹ Bede, *Hist. Eccl.* iii. 8. See C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (1971), 14–18. There is no direct evidence, however, for the bishopric of Carlisle.

⁵⁰ 'No direct, contemporary evidence relating to any late Roman church in Britain is known, either from history or from surviving inscriptions' (Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 143). For possibilities at Lincoln, Exeter, and Wells, see Painter, *op. cit.* (note 48), 2034–44.

⁵¹ Frere, *op. cit.* (note 27), 297, though with reservations owing to the loss of evidence. For the few Christian objects found at Silchester, see G.C. Boon, *Silchester, the Roman Town of Calleva* (1974), 183–4.

failed to develop strong local roots even in the reign of Theodosius I when orthodox Christianity was proclaimed the exclusive religion of the Empire?

The answer to this phenomenon has usually been sought in a revival of Romano-Celtic paganism in Britain following the reign of Julian.⁵² To a considerable extent this must be true. If in some other parts of the Empire the reign of Valentinian merely postponed the demise of paganism, in Britain it witnessed a burst of activity, sometimes as at Lydney led by provincials of high rank.⁵³ Lydney with its guest-house, bath-house, and long buildings was a big well-organised complex and it responded to popular needs. More than 6,000 nearly all worn copper used by ordinary people, and an array of other votive objects, show that it was well patronised over a considerable period.⁵⁴ At Woodeaton, more than 2,730 coins, mainly fourth-century copper, were found, with the period Constantine-Valentinian best represented and also associated with very many small offerings.⁵⁵ At Frilford, the latest pathway leading up to the temple produced 78 coins all of which were fourth- or early fifth-century, with the main incidence 350–400. Pagan's Hill produced 83 coins from Gallienus to Arcadius.⁵⁶ At Nettleton there was an interesting development. The temple had been allowed to decay after c. 350, but in the reign of Valentinian it was restored on a minor scale before a final period of decline c. 390.⁵⁷ These are some examples out of many. They show Romano-Celtic paganism was solidly founded and enjoyed popular support. Nowhere else in the Empire do we find large sites devoted to pagan worship being constructed in the reign of Valentinian. Partly this popularity may have been due to the pagan cults as the cults of harvest and healing, partly because they continued rites familiar to generations of worshippers from pre-Roman times.⁵⁸ Temples, such as Hayling Island, Harlow, Frilford, and Uley were built on sites sacred in the Iron Age.⁵⁹ Given a renewed interest in hill-forts and Celtic art at this period, a continuance and even revival of traditional Celtic religion is understandable. The two temples built in the last quarter of the fourth century in Maiden Castle within three miles of Dorchester may reflect this double tendency.⁶⁰

The continued strength of Romano-Celtic paganism would have put a brake on the advance of Christianity. It would hardly have sufficed to turn back the tide that elsewhere

⁵² Thus Guy, *op. cit.* (note 29), 275. He also suggests, as I have tentatively, that 'the circumstances leading to the burial of the Christian silver hoard at Water Newton may have been the same as those causing a tank bearing a Chi-Rho monogram to be thrown down a well at Ashton', less than ten miles away, though I believe the cause was not simply the resurgence of paganism.

⁵³ See R.E.M. and T.V. Wheeler, *Report on the Excavations of the Prehistoric, Roman and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucs.* Soc. Antiq. Research Rep. ix (1932). An examination of the watercolour of the mosaic originally found on the site suggests, against Wheeler's suggestion of an official on the governor's staff (pp. 102–4), that Titus Flavius Senilis was 'superintendent of the cult', (*pr(ae)positus rel(igionis)*), a personage of some local importance. See R.P. Wright, *Britannia* xvi (1985), 248–9.

⁵⁴ Wheeler, *op. cit.* (note 53), 61–2. 270 bronze bracelets among offerings can also reasonably be described as 'the offerings of the poor' (p. 82).

⁵⁵ J. Kirk, 'Bronzes from Woodeaton', *Oxoniensia* xiv (1949), 1–45.

⁵⁶ These examples are quoted by Painter, *op. cit.* (note 20), 153.

⁵⁷ W.J. Wedlake, *The Excavation of the Shrine of Apollo at Nettleton, Wiltshire, 1956–1971*, Soc. Antiq. Research Rep. xi (1982), 79–82.

⁵⁸ Healing rites at Lydney, see Wheeler, *op. cit.* (note 53), 102.

⁵⁹ Harlow, *Britannia* x (1980), 378 and xx (1990), 303. Hayling Island, see W. Rodwell, *Temple Archaeology. Problems of the Present and Portents for the Future* BAR 77 (i) (1980), 211–18, and R. Downey *et al.*, in *ibid.*, 289–96. Uley, timber buildings with Iron Age coins recorded in *Britannia* x (1979), 323. Frilford, see J.S.P. Bradford and R.G. Goodchild, 'Excavations at Frilford, Berks', *Oxoniensia* iv (1939), 36.

⁶⁰ Dating of Maiden Castle temples to 364 or later, see R.E.M. Wheeler, *Antiq. Journ.* xv. 3 (1935), 271. References to late occupation of other Romano-Celtic temples, see M.J.T. Lewis, *Temples in Roman Britain* (1966), 140–6, and P.H. Rahtz and L. Watts, 'The end of Roman temples in the West of Britain', in P.J. Casey, *The End of Roman Britain*, BAR 79 (1979), 183–201.

was flowing so strongly in favour of the new religion. There was, however, an event in the reign of Valentinian I that affected Britain alone and may have had a significant destructive impact on the progress of Christianity as it did on the economic life of the province. This was the 'barbarian conspiracy' of 367–369.

The Constantinian period had been a prosperous one for the landowners of the province. It was the age when villas reached their maximum number and extent, some to become great manor houses covering hectares of ground, such as Bignor, Littlecote, Rockbourne Down, Woodchester, Barnsley Park and many others. It was not so comfortable for the poorer classes that served the villa-owners or bailiffs on the imperial estates and whose toil was responsible for the regular movements of grain from Britain to the Continent.⁶¹ In 359, Julian preparing for his campaign against the Franks on the Lower Rhine caused a huge fleet of some 600 ships to be built to transport grain from Britain.⁶² A contemporary, however, the anonymous author of *De Rebus Bellicis*, points out how compared with those who had benefited from the policies of Constantine (and his sons) the misery of the provincials was increasing.⁶³ Evidence does not suggest grinding poverty, but the growing gap between rich and poor on the land was attracting contemporaries' attention.

In addition, in 360 there had been serious incursions into Britain by the Picts from north of the Wall and the Scots from across the Irish Sea.⁶⁴ In 365 the Saxons and Attacotti added their savage attacks to those of the Picts and Scots.⁶⁵ Then in 367 the situation reached a crisis. The various groups of barbarians made common cause and this time seem to have been assisted by rebel *coloni* and slaves. Ammianus describes the coalition of forces as a 'barbarian conspiracy'.⁶⁶ News of the uprising reached Valentinian at Amiens in June 367 when he was on his way to Trier, his military capital in the West, to combat the Alamanni. It was bad. The commander of the forces on the Saxon Shore, *Comes* Nectaridus, had been defeated and killed. His senior commander, the *Dux Britanniarum*, Fullofaudes had been captured in an ambush. Troops were deserting to the rebels and invaders. The province was collapsing into anarchy.⁶⁷ The authorities faced the gravest crisis in Britain since the revolt of Queen Boudicca and the Iceni in A.D. 60.

Coalitions of barbarians pursuing a common goal directed against the Empire in this period are rare, if not unique. Apart, however, from seducing numbers of the *Areani* whose duty it was to provide early warning of hostile movements to the Roman commanders, the invaders must have found support among the population. There seems to be no serious doubt about this. Ammianus speaks of a 'mob (*plebem*) of various natives (*gentium*) raging savagely'⁶⁸ who had to be overcome along with other previously mentioned enemy forces and deserters from the army.

Valentinian acted promptly but cautiously, two senior officers being despatched to Britain to report and if possible set right the disasters. This they were unable to do, and

⁶¹ Ammianus XVIII. 2. 3.

⁶² Exact numbers given by authorities vary. Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* III. 5 says 800, while Julian himself says he had 600, 400 of which were built in less than ten months (*Letter to the Athenians*, 279–80).

⁶³ Anon: E.A. Thompson (ed.), *A Roman Reformer and Inventor* (1952), ii. 2. and 3. The poor 'held down by force'. Also, Zosimus, *Hist. Nova* IV. 16. for over-taxation leading to a popular revolt.

⁶⁴ Ammianus XX. 1. 1, the occasion of Lupicinus' arrival in Britain.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* XXVI. 4.5.

⁶⁶ *ibid.* XXVIII. 8. 1 (*barbarica conspiratione*).

⁶⁷ The detail of events has been reconstructed by R. Tomlin and R.C. Blockley, *Britannia* xi (1980), 223–6. I am inclined to accept a two-year campaign by Theodosius. See *Britannia* v (1974), 303–9.

⁶⁸ Ammianus XXVII. 8. 9, '*diffusam variarum gentium plebem, et ferocientem immaniter*', suggests widespread uprising not confined to invading forces of Picts, Scots, and Saxons. For 'savage frenzy of brigandage' in Gaul at this time, see *ibid.* XXVIII. 2. 10.

therefore he committed four regiments of his field army under Count Theodosius to restore the situation.⁶⁹ Two years were to elapse before that was achieved.

The usual assumption has been that the main onset of the barbarians was across the Wall and in the north-west of the province where Irish (Scottish) raids could be expected.⁷⁰ Ammianus, on the other hand, paints a rather different picture. Theodosius makes London his base,⁷¹ and he indicates that the city itself had been threatened. It had been 'plunged into the greatest difficulties', and had to be 'rescued'.⁷² Thereafter (probably in 368) it became Theodosius' base for operations, and it was from this base that the general sent out expeditions to round up bands of the enemy, 'who were ranging about and were laden with heavy packs' (i.e. of loot).⁷³ All this was happening within campaigning distance of London. There is nothing said about an advance northwards to York, far less to the Wall or the North-West, and indeed, the Picts and Scots are not mentioned as having been defeated. While there is evidence for some destruction at Chesters and Birdoswald, there is no consistent destruction layer that can be dated securely to 367.⁷⁴ Alterations to other forts on the Wall about this time, such as at Housesteads are not accompanied by evidence of disaster.⁷⁵

There is, however, one area in striking distance of London which could have invited a combination of barbarian attack (especially from the Saxons) and local revolt. The area covered by the Fens⁷⁶ and extending westwards through Cambridgeshire into north-east Northamptonshire was thickly populated in late-Roman times. The Castor–Water Newton area alone can claim sixteen large sites, and the suburban occupation of Durobrivae (Water Newton) extended over 100 hectares.⁷⁷ In north-east Northamptonshire the inventory of archaeological sites shows that every parish can boast one or more Roman sites, usually marked by late-Roman Nene valley pottery and third- to fourth-century coins.⁷⁸ Some of these agricultural sites are extensive. In Barnwell parish, for instance, there are five Romano-British sites,⁷⁹ two of which, one including a large late-Roman aisled building and 'bailiff's house' and the other a number of buildings, extend over two hectares (5 acres).⁸⁰ At Castor, in the middle of this populous area, stood the massive Roman building discovered in the 1820s by E.T. Artis and suggested by him as a 'procurator's palace'.⁸¹ Six miles south of Barnwell, at Titchmarsh, a fragment of an inscription was found on a shaped

⁶⁹ *ibid.* xxvii 8.2.

⁷⁰ Thus, S.S. Frere, *Britannia* (1967), 350, and (2nd edn, 1974), 391–3.

⁷¹ London had been Lupicinus' administrative base for operations in 360 (Ammianus xx. 1. 1.) but he did not have to fight his way there or rescue the city from imminent danger.

⁷² Ammianus xxvii. 8. 8.

⁷³ *ibid.* xxvii. 8. 7.

⁷⁴ For evidence of destruction, Frere (1967), *op. cit.* (note 70), 353; but questioned by D. Breeze and B. Dobson, 'Hadrian's Wall, some problems', *Britannia* iii (1972), 200–6.

⁷⁵ Cited from Frere (1967), *loc. cit.* (note 70).

⁷⁶ For the Wash area, see S.J. Hallam, *Antiq. Journ.* xlv (1964), 19–32 (300 sites).

⁷⁷ J.P. Wild, 'Roman settlement in the Lower Nene valley', *Arch. Journ.* cxxxi (1974), 140–70. The apogee of this development was in the fourth century.

⁷⁸ *An Inventory of Archaeological Sites in North-East Northamptonshire*, RCHM (1975). Also, D. Windell, *The Upper Nene Valley in the Iron Age and Roman Periods*, Northants County Council, 18.

⁷⁹ From north to south, TL 08 SE 076847, 076836, 062832, 068818 and 073817 (the site 063824 may be a confusion for 062832 on the same farm).

⁸⁰ Excavated by John Hadman and the writer 1985–1989. Reported in *Britannia* xx (1989), 290 and xxi (1990), 332. Earlier work reported by J. Hadman and S. Upex. 'The Roman villa at North Lodge Farm', *Durobrivae* ii, (1974), 27–9.

⁸¹ E.T. Artis, *The Durobrivae of Antoninus* (1828), pl. xiii, and J.P. Wild and G.B. Dannell in 1970 revealed walls 1.2 m thick for rooms at the west end of the north block, built post-250. *Britannia* ii (1971), 264. It had also been burnt. For the latest reconstruction, see *Durobrivae* ix (1984), 22–5, esp. fig. 12B.

stone with the letters P.P., perhaps (*terminus*) p(*ublice*) p(*ositus*), i.e. the boundary of the imperial estate.⁸² With its considerable agricultural population, the Fens and the clay lands to the east and west of the Nene Valley could have been one of the bread-baskets of the Roman West.

The ships, however, that could travel down the Nene could also travel up its sluggish waters. The Saxons would have come that way, and the defeat of the Count of the Saxon Shore in 367 suggests they may have been responsible with old scores to pay. Combination with local insurgents would be necessary before areas that less than ten years before had been supplying great quantities of grain to armies on the Continent could be reduced to 'the utmost conditions of famine'.⁸³

When one looks at sites recently examined in north-east Northamptonshire one cannot rule out possible evidence for local disturbances. The Ashton font (?) was found severely damaged near the bottom of a well inside the settlement.⁸⁴ It had obviously been battered and thrown in deliberately, the same fate reserved also for a similar Christian tank found in a well at Caversham on the Thames above Reading.⁸⁵ The aisled building, 30 m by 11 m, found at North Lodge Farm, Barnwell, with the aisles supported by stone-lined post-holes 2 to 3 m deep, had been demolished some time around 360–370, and the subsequent final occupation of the site in Roman times had been of a poorer quality. A destroyed estate depot seems a likely identification.⁸⁶ In the mud of a pond that had formed just to the west of the 'bailiff's house' was found a hoard of fragments of six lead objects, which had been cut up with an axe as though for distribution to members of a gang. Weighing 10½ kg in all, it would be the sort of looters' pack that Ammianus describes as being thrown away on the approach of government forces.⁸⁷ A mile to the south at South Lodge Farm, small-scale work in 1990 revealed the remains flecked with charcoal of a clay wall of another Late Roman agricultural building. A mile to the north on the highest point in the area (72 m) was a small rectangular building with an exterior foundation perhaps for a stairway serving a look-out, again burnt down and succeeded by barnyard spread.⁸⁸ More work needs to be done with an eye to the destruction layers before the final phase of occupation, but these examples may be straws in the wind.

How does Christianity fit into this picture? The answer may still be 'nowhere'. The Water Newton and Mildenhall treasures may have been buried as a result of events that had nothing to do with the barbarian conspiracy. Yet, together with the Corbridge lanx they form a group of silver treasures that were buried long before the end of the Roman period and its accompanying disturbances.⁸⁹ The insecurity of the years 367–69 would seem an acceptable possibility. There is less doubt about the lead fonts (?). No Christian congrega-

⁸² *Inventory*, (op. cit. note 78), 99 and pl. 22.

⁸³ Ammianus XXVII 8. 1, '*ad ultimam vexatam (Britannias) inopiam*'.

⁸⁴ Guy, op. cit. (note 30), 11.

⁸⁵ Recorded in *Britannia* xx (1989), 333–4 and pl. xxvi. 'The tank had been damaged by fire and the side cut away from the base which was not recovered'. Others 'badly damaged', see Guy, op. cit. (note 29), 275.

⁸⁶ The aisled barn, its demolition and subsequent late fourth-century occupation (coin of Valentinian II, 375–392) has been recorded in *Britannia* xx (1989), 290. A full report on the site is being prepared by John Hadman and the writer.

⁸⁷ The lead was exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries in the autumn of 1990. Report by Hadman and Friend in *Britannia* (forthcoming). For looters throwing away 'heavy packs' at the approach of government forces, see Ammianus XXVII. 8. 7.

⁸⁸ Recorded in *Britannia* xxii (1991).

⁸⁹ For the possible attribution of the lanx' burial to the disturbances from the 'barbarian conspiracy', see Painter, op. cit. (note 16), n.64.

tion would destroy such valuable liturgical objects and throw the remains down wells.⁹⁰ Whoever consigned them to the rubbish pit was no friend of Christianity.

The evidence seems to converge. Down to c. 360 the Christian Church was making significant headway. It was in the mainstream of Christian doctrine, liturgy, and art. After that date its slow progress contrasts with its ever more rapid advance on the Continent. There are no major Christian sites in Roman Britain except perhaps the shrine of St Alban which is still to be discovered. The Christian villa-owners produced no figure to compare either with Martin of Tours or the succession of aristocratic leaders that maintained the superiority of the Catholic Church in Gaul and Spain under the Arian Germanic kings. Christianity did not perish in Britain, but it did not make the impact on the population that could have been expected. The small, possibly Christian buildings found overlying some pagan religious sites, such as at Uley⁹¹ bear no comparison with the 'basilique paléochrétienne' springing up even in remote areas on the Continent.⁹² The church at Richborough built probably c. 350 may have continued as long as the fort was occupied, but that is almost a solitary example.⁹³ Looking further ahead, it is interesting that in 429, Germanus of Auxerre did not summon an episcopal council to condemn Pelagianism. Christianity in the last age of Roman Britain continued to be in touch with Gaul, and had some support among intellectual leaders and perhaps among townsfolk such as the family of St Patrick; but the great majority of the people stood aside.⁹⁴ Something had knocked the heart out of rural Christianity in areas where previously it had been making most progress.⁹⁵ The finger of suspicion points to the years 367–369 as decisive for its fate. The 'barbarian conspiracy' wrought its havoc just at the time when paganism and Christianity were finely balanced. Associated too much with the defects of the imperial system and with the villa-owning aristocracy, Christianity failed to surmount the crisis. When in the 440s the Anglo-Saxon invasion began in earnest the Christian Church was unable to provide the same rallying point as it did with success on the Continent.

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⁹⁰ The Ashton font (?) could have formed part of looters' booty. Two fragments cut from another lead tank were found below it (Guy, *op. cit.* (note 30), 11). One of the Icklingham Christian tanks was found containing 'a mass of waste lead and iron objects' (*Britannia* iii (1972), 330). The Oxborough (Norfolk) similar tank seems to have been damaged before burial (*Britannia* xvii (1986), 403).

⁹¹ Thomas, *op. cit.* (note 1), 133, and ch. 7 for full discussion of available evidence.

⁹² Examples from *Actes du Xle Congrès*, *op. cit.* (note 46), vols ii and iii. For an estate church at Primulacium in Gaul built c. 400 see letter from Paulinus of Nola to Severus (*Ep.* xxxi.1., *CSEL* 29, 267).

⁹³ For Richborough, see P.D.C. Brown, 'The church at Richborough', *Britannia* ii (1971), 225–31.

⁹⁴ For a summary of the likely strength of Christianity in Britain in the early-fifth century, see Painter, *op. cit.* (note 20), 159–67. Painter stresses the relative isolation of the landowning aristocracy in Britain from the people as a whole, not least through the failure of Latin, the language of the Church, to spread downwards throughout rural society, unlike in Gaul and Spain.

⁹⁵ My view expressed in 1968 that, probably thanks to the influence of St Martin, the countryside in Roman Britain was turning to Christianity c. 380 needs modification ('The Christianisation of Roman Britain', in M.W. Barley and R.P.C. Hanson (eds), *Christianity in Roman and Sub-Roman Britain to A.D. 500* (1968), 43). The cult of Martin seems, however, at least to have been remembered when Augustine landed in Kent in 597, but one has yet to find clear evidence for rural Christianity surviving in sub-Roman Britain in the area occupied by the Jutes, Saxons, and Angles. It seems certain in contrast to the situation on the Continent that there was no episcopal or parish life.