

Gildas and Glastonbury:
Revisiting the Origins of Glastonbury Abbey

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THIS paper was first read at a conference on Mother's Day, an appropriate date to re-examine the legendary origins of what has sometimes been considered the Mother Church of English Christianity, namely the original chapel at Glastonbury Abbey, dedicated to both Christ and Mary. It was doubly appropriate to examine this issue during a symposium on Irish and Anglo-Saxon literary cultures in honor of J. E. Cross because many of the English legends of the abbey's origin emerged from, or have been claimed to emerge from, a Celtic context. And they have been derided as a result. H. P. R. Finberg probably states overtly the feeling implicit in much Anglo-centric scholarship on the issue when he writes that "[t]owards the close of the eleventh century Welsh writers began to interest themselves in Glastonbury . . . [and] the monstrous edifice of fiction was then to all intents and purposes complete."¹

Twentieth-century scholarship has treated the sources of the legends, largely in oral tradition and monastic record-keeping, as what in critical jargon would be called marginalized and de-privileged. The result has been a consensus attitude that the legends are nothing more than a "rank forgery," to use a phrase David Dumville aimed at one aspect of the corpus.² However, a new postmodern spin on the evidence can rehabilitate this tradition. The leverage for such a re-centering is provided by recent reinterpretation of British archeological evidence. Also, in the context of today's multicultural studies, we are better equipped to re-privilege the tradition, with its Celtic and oral associations, as a form of mythic history. We do

¹ H. P. R. Finberg, *West-Country Historical Studies* (Newton Abbot, 1969), pp. 86-87.

² Quoted by Michael Costen, *The Origins of Somerset* (Manchester, 1992), p. 78.

not feel the same compulsion as some earlier generations of twentieth-century scholars to discard the sources for being beyond the margins of history as defined by traditional Western scholarship. A similar approach can be taken simultaneously to re-center Gildas's account of the coming of Christianity to Britain, which can be posited as an early analogue to the Glastonbury tradition.

Glastonbury Tor thrusts up some five hundred feet above the Somerset Levels. Its unique topography has fueled speculation that it may have had prehistoric religious associations in a British landscape known for the continuity of such tradition across eras of religious change. A pattern of protrusions on its sides has provided a basis for a controversial theory that it may have been the site of a Neolithic labyrinth.³ Fragments of associated legendary material in medieval texts raise the possibility of its association with pre-Christian Celtic mythology.⁴ And the site has been revered successively and simultaneously as a sacred site within the Christian tradition by Catholic, Anglican and non-conformist faiths. In post-Christian Britain it has also become a site of New Age pilgrimage, evidenced by the crystal shops in the town and the annual rock music festival on its outskirts.

Glastonbury would thus seem to be well established as a sacred place on the order of numinous landscapes in traditions such as the Native American, a site with a remarkable capacity to draw together often otherwise conflicting traditions. But modern scholarship has savaged its claims to such a position. The extant detailed Christian account of its history as a sacred place dates to William of Malmesbury's writings in the twelfth century and to elaborations of the same in the thirteenth. The tradition of a primitive Christian presence at the site, as described by William's late and interpolated text, seems absurd.

³ Philip Rahtz, "Pagan and Christian by the Severn Sea," in *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey: Essays in Honour of the Ninetieth Birthday of C. A. Raleigh Radford*, ed. Lesley Abrams and James P. Carley (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 3-37, at 26; Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 107.

⁴ Alfred K. Siewers, "'A Cloud of Witnesses': The Origins of Glastonbury Abbey in the Context of Early Christianity in Western Britain" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Wales at Aberystwyth, 1994), pp. 74-80.

The tradition was largely written off by modern scholars as the result of Anglo-Norman political forgery.⁵

But in recent years there have been important changes in the way the archeological evidence regarding early Christianity in Britain has been seen, changes that affect the context in which the Glastonbury tradition can be viewed. These changes in archeological interpretation were spurred in part by the desire to re-examine the material evidence from the perspective of a new skepticism regarding literary accounts. However, the archeological reinterpretations themselves in turn justify a new look at the literary material, analyzing the latter less from the standpoint of a lack of historicity and more as a different way of viewing history, a way of seeing that may reflect cycles of events in symbolic terms, and may be seen as an extension of pre-Christian mythology in an area of western Britain that remained close to the Celtic cultural zone in early medieval times.

First, let us briefly survey the changes in interpretation of the archeological evidence. During much of this century it was assumed by many scholars that Christianity in Roman Britain was a religion of the urban upper class, limited in extent, and that it soon disappeared with the evacuation of the legions in the early fifth century. That view has changed. Dorothy Watts's 1991 re-survey of archeological evidence for Romano-British Christianity concluded that there was an even distribution of probable rural and urban Christian sites, and that neither exhibited signs of substantial wealth. Watts also found that most of the probable Romano-British church sites with pre-Christian religious associations were in rural areas, and that there were indications of a significant continuity of sacred sites from pagan to early medieval Christian times.⁶ She concluded that "one of the reasons for establishing a Christian church at a particular site was, consciously or unconsciously, to preserve that tradition of sanctity."⁷ Many of the sites exhibiting such continuity are located in southwestern Britain. Cannington Cemetery is one of

⁵ See, for example, C. H. Slover, "Glastonbury Abbey and the Fusing of English Literary Culture," *Speculum* 10 (1935): 147-60.

⁶ Dorothy Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London, 1991), pp. 18, 107-13, 184, 211, and 217-20.

⁷ Watts, p. 108.

the most important examples. Located in Somerset not far from Glastonbury, it shows an apparent continuity of probable Christian burials dating from the fourth to the seventh century. As a result of her re-examination of material originally surveyed ten years earlier by Charles Thomas, Watts upgraded the ranking of the Glastonbury region in terms of its density of probable Romano-British Christian sites, raising it from the third-highest to the second-highest category.⁸ Kenneth Dark in his controversial 1994 book *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* went a step beyond Watts, concluding that "Christianity was far more widespread in the Romano-British countryside than elsewhere in the West," and that it was "strongest among the poor."⁹

Meanwhile, Thomas had turned his attention to the inscribed memorial stones of early medieval Britain. In a 1994 book he presented a detailed theory about how these stones probably represent a pattern of Irish migration to post-Roman Britain that coincided with a reinvigoration of Christianity in the island's western Celtic zone.¹⁰ Thomas pointed to the *Sanas Chormaic*, written ca. 900, which lists purported Irish strongholds in western Britain in the late Roman and early medieval period. Included in this list is a mention of Glastonbury as an Irish religious center.¹¹

In addition to revisions in the interpretation of early British Christianity from an archeological perspective, there has also been a reinterpretation of evidence at Glastonbury itself. Philip Rahtz, the excavator of Glastonbury Tor's summit, in recent years has presented a revised interpretation of his findings, positing that early medieval remains atop the Tor were probably those of an eremetical Christian community.¹² Earlier, he had posited them as being secular because of the evidence of significant meat consumption there, but he later reversed his

⁸ Watts, pp. 218-19.

⁹ Kenneth Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* (London, 1994), pp. 36, 38.

¹⁰ Charles Thomas, *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 245, 324.

¹¹ Thomas, p. 44.

¹² Philip A. Rahtz, "Pagan and Christian by the Severn Sea," in *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. Abrams and Carley, pp. 3-38, at 32-33.

views based on evidence of meat-eating at other early Insular monastic sites. Archeological excavations at the later abbey site at the base of the Tor, while inconclusive, indicate the possibility of a Romano-British presence there, including a probable Roman-era well at the corner of the original chapel site.¹³ Such a well could have been a focus of pre-Christian religious devotion, given its placement relative to later development of the church and abbey, as well as the strong Celtic tradition of sacred wells.¹⁴

If we examine the Glastonbury tradition from the standpoint not of historicity but of mythic history, exhibiting a continuity with forms of Celtic and Germanic tradition, we can find a mythic paradigm that matches the archeological evidence. The basic structural model for the Glastonbury legend is the theme of a sacred site that was once lost and then refound. And this basic structure of the tradition is found more than a century before William of Malmesbury's original text, in the *Life of Dunstan* by the anonymous "B.," written ca. 1000. B.'s account tells us that the old church at Glastonbury was not made by human skill, "though prepared by heaven for the salvation of mankind . . . consecrated to Christ and the holy Mary his mother, as God himself, the architect of heaven, demonstrated by many miracles and wonderful mysteries." According to this account, it was rediscovered by the earliest "neophytes of the catholic law." The area of Glastonbury is also described in terms similar to descriptions of the Celtic Otherworld in legends. It tells of "a certain royal island known locally from ancient times as Glastonbury . . . spread wide with numerous inlets, surrounded by lakes full of fish and by rivers, suitable for human use and, what is more important, endowed by God with sacred gifts." After rediscovery of the old church there, B. tells us, "crowds of the faithful came from all around to worship and humbly dwelt in that precious place."¹⁵

¹³ Philip A. Rahtz, *Glastonbury* (London, 1993), pp. 28, 84-87.

¹⁴ See, for example, Francis Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales* (1954; reprint Cardiff, 1992).

¹⁵ Quoted by Antonia Gransden, "The Growth of the Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century," *JEH* 27 (1976): 337-58; reprinted in her *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (London and Rio Grande, OH, 1992), pp. 153-74, at 159.

St Dunstan's tenth-century floruit at Glastonbury was marked by influence from Irish teachers to whom Dunstan supposedly credited his own education. And, as already mentioned, the *Sanas Chormaic* indicates the existence of a tradition associating Glastonbury with Ireland at the end of the ninth century. William's original text, as best as it can be reconstructed, also indicates a strong Celtic presence at Glastonbury. According to his account, the old church was built in the second century or earlier, and his report of an early medieval effort by Celtic Christians to re-dedicate the old church suggests a period of disuse.¹⁶ William in turn emphasizes the reuse of the site by the Anglo-Saxons, citing as evidence both monuments and a charter existing in his day which reflected an earlier Celtic presence.¹⁷ In addition, the surviving text of a purported eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Glastonbury charter uses biblical language from a pre-Vulgate text used in Celtic regions.¹⁸

The paradigm of the tradition, stripped of later multiplied detail, is simple: it is the story of an older, lost church refound. It parallels the legend of the Holy Grail and of enchanted wastelands in Celtic lore. It echoes what is known about the regeneration of pagan sites in Britain as Romano-British Christian sites, and the reuse of the latter as early Christian sites. It also oddly echoes the historical rediscovery (or reinvention) of Glastonbury as a sacred site by various Christian and "post-Christian" traditions.

Criticisms of the Glastonbury tradition as unhistorical have focused on the lack of corroboration from other sources, mainly Bede. But Bede focuses on only certain areas of England and on a particular project that was in part concerned with denigrating the Celtic British Church, and there are sometimes conflicting partisan traditions in the works of other historiographers. Western British traditions, for example, claim that

¹⁶ John Scott, ed. and trans., *The Early History of Glastonbury: An Edition, Translation, and Study of William of Malmesbury's De antiquitate Glastonie ecclesie* (Woodbridge, 1981), pp. 42-51, 54-55, 60-65; Joseph Stephenson, trans., *Gesta regum*, vol. 3 pt. 1 of *The Church Historians of England*, 5 vols. (London, 1854); reprinted as *The Kings before the Norman Conquest* (Lampeter, 1989), p. 20.

¹⁷ Scott, trans., *The Early History of Glastonbury*, pp. 84-85, 88-89.

¹⁸ James Armitage Robinson, *Somerset Historical Essays* (London, 1921), pp. 51-53.

Eadwine of Deira was converted by the Britons, in direct contradiction to Bede's account.¹⁹ Western Britain was at the center of tremendous political and cultural flux between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic zones in the early Middle Ages, a process that is imperfectly understood but is increasingly being seen as more of a kind of cultural hybridization than a clearcut annihilation of Celtic influence by Anglo-Saxon warriors. As Brian Hope-Taylor has noted regarding the culturally ambiguous remains of what he calls the Anglo-British archeological site at Yeavinger, "[i]t often serves political propagandists well to obscure identities."²⁰ And Lesley Abrams leaves us with this useful warning regarding Glastonbury traditions: "So much has been lost that the absence of earlier corroboration . . . must not be used to draw conclusions from silence."²¹

One written voice that has survived from early medieval Britain with potential insight into the Glastonbury question is Gildas, who is now thought to have written his *De excidio Britanniae* about the year 500.²² In it we find a strange account of Christianity coming to Britain late in the reign of Emperor Tiberius, by 37 A.D. Gildas writes in his eighth section:

Interea glaciali frigore rigenti insulae et velut longiore terrarum secessu soli visibili non proximae verus ille non de firmamento solum temporali sed de summa etiam caelorum arce tempora cuncta excedente universo orbi praeifulgidum sui coruscum ostendens, tempore, ut scimus, summo Tiberii Caesaris, quo absque ullo impedimento eius propagabatur religio, comminata senatu nolente a principe morte delatoribus militum eiusdem, radios suos primum indulget, id est sua praecepta, Christus.²³

¹⁹ D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1992), pp. 78-79, 85.

²⁰ Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*, Department of the Environment Archaeological Reports 7 (London, 1977), p. 294.

²¹ Lesley Abrams, "St. Patrick and Glastonbury Abbey: *nihil ex nihilo fit?*" in *Saint Patrick A.D. 493-1993*, ed. David N. Dumville, *Studies in Celtic History* 13 (Woodbridge, 1993), pp. 233-44, at 240.

²² Patrick Sims-Williams, "Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons," *CMCS* 6 (1983): 1-30.

²³ *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom (London, 1978), p. 91.

Or in Michael Winterbottom's translation:

Meanwhile, to an island numb with chill ice and far removed, as in a remote nook of the world, from the visible sun, Christ made a present of his rays (that is, his precepts), Christ the true sun, which shows its dazzling brilliance to the entire earth, not from the temporal firmament merely, but from the highest citadel of heaven, that goes beyond all time. This happened first, as we know, in the last years of the emperor Tiberius, at a time when Christ's religion was being propagated without hindrance: for, against the wishes of the senate, the emperor threatened the death penalty for informers against soldiers of God.²⁴

Gildas's account could well be an echo of the tradition cited by Tertullian, writing *ca.* 200, that Christianity in his time had already spread to places in Britain inaccessible to the Romans.²⁵ Likewise, another early Church father, Origen, who like many of the Alexandrian scholars was enamored of the druids, wrote in the third century of how Celtic areas of Europe had been especially receptive to Christianity (presumably at an early date), because he said their native religion had involved a sense of the unity of the Godhead.²⁶

Now, Gildas's words, among the few surviving from Dark Age Britain, have not gone unused in the controversy over the Glastonbury tradition. Partisans of an early origin of Glastonbury have argued that Gildas's account supports their view. The consensus of modern scholarship, however, has ignored Gildas's undetailed report, which largely goes unmentioned in historical surveys of Christianity in Britain. On this point, religious historians have taken their cue from modern commentators on Gildas who have either interpreted his words as indicating that Christianity came to the world during the reign of Tiberius, or that Gildas was hopelessly muddled and unreliable as a historian on all counts. The first analysis of the passage seems to involve too much special pleading, however. Gildas does seem clearly to be talking about the coming of Christianity

²⁴ Winterbottom, pp. 18-19.

²⁵ S. Ireland, *Roman Britain: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (London and New York, 1996), p. 209.

²⁶ Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), p. 114.

to Britain specifically, and a partial analogue in Eusebius's *Chronicon* could not be a source for that part of his statement.²⁷ And while Gildas is still regarded as a dubious historian by twentieth-century standards, he has increasingly been rehabilitated. Nicholas Higham and John Casey among others have indicated that Gildas's history has its own internal logic (even if not a modern historical structure) that can be made to fit a plausible hypothesis of fifth-century events.

Casey has fit Gildas's narrative into a framework of archeological evidence,²⁸ and Higham has indicated how Gildas's muddled accounts of the building of the northern walls may relate to his own location in the southwest and his familiarity with post-Roman construction of boundary dykes there, such as the Wansdyke, behind which Glastonbury and other southwest locations would have been sheltered.²⁹ While later tradition viewed Gildas as the son of a Pictish king, thus born in the north, it also associated him with Glastonbury as well as with Brittany, all probable areas of operation for a fifth-century British Christian. Higham and Dark have made strong cases for his having been based during most of his career in the southwest.³⁰ Thus when Gildas uses the phrase *ut scimus* ("as we know") in his passage regarding the coming of Christianity to Britain, he could well be referring to a tradition current in the late-fifth or early-sixth century among Christians in southwestern Britain.

If there was a tradition in Gildas's time regarding an early introduction of Christianity into western Britain, it may have formed part of the developing cultural identity of the western Britons as Christian Celts beset by pagan Anglo-Saxons. In fact the development of an early monastic community at Glastonbury in such a relatively un-Romanized corner of the West

²⁷ Hugh Williams, ed., *Gildae de Excidio Britanniae, Fragmenta, Liber de Paenitentia, Accedit et Lorica Gildae*, 2 vols., Cymmrodorian Record Series 3 (London, 1899), vol. 1, p. 22.

²⁸ J. Casey, "The End of Fort Garrisons on Hadrian's Wall: A Hypothetical Model," in *L'armée romaine et les barbares du IIIe au VIIIe siècle*, ed. F. Vallet and M. Kazanski (Paris, 1994), pp. 259-67.

²⁹ Nicholas Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1992), pp. 153-68.

³⁰ Nicholas Higham, "Gildas, Roman Walls, and British Dykes," *CMCS* 22 (1991): 1-14; Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom*, pp. 258-66.

Country with possible Celtic religious associations could in itself have been part of a cultural reaction against the collapsed Roman order. Gildas, despite his rhetorical *Romanitas*, was no enthusiast regarding Roman ways, as can be seen by the passage immediately preceding his account of the coming of Christianity to Britain in which he discusses Roman oppression. The tradition of an early Christian mission to Britain may have reflected a nostalgic view of a primitive kind of frontier Christianity, which could have found support in traditions such as those preserved in the writings of Tertullian and Origen. It is not impossible that the tradition could have become focused early on upon a monastic site at Glastonbury, which itself could have been a sacred landscape in earlier Celtic pagan and Romano-British Christian traditions.

Gildas's own incredible-sounding words are, in their broad concept of an early date for Christian origins in Britain, if anything supported by recent reinterpretations of archeological material as indicating more widespread evidence of Christianity in late Roman Britain than previously assumed. Likewise, the broad outline of the Glastonbury tradition can be seen as reflecting a cyclical process involving the reuse of sacred sites which seems to have been typical of British traditions. By regarding such traditions more on their own terms, and by seeing them in the context of vernacular mythic tradition rather than modern or Classical definitions of historicity, they can be appreciated more effectively in relation to the broad outlines of archeological interpretation. All in all, it takes less special pleading to accept the broad outline of the Glastonbury tradition on its own terms, given the totality of the known archeological and historical and cultural contexts, than to reject it entirely on the basis of narrowly focused analysis regarding its historicity. The Glastonbury legend as myth may reflect an historically plausible memory of contact between Irish-Welsh migrants and a remnant of earlier Romano-British Christianity. As myth, it may be seen as a symbolic representation of cycles of religious change. And as a mythic framework of narrative, like the Arthurian cycle to which it has been linked, it has erupted into our own sense of historicity as a cultural influence that has taken on the force of fact, a potent symbol of spiritual continuity across cultures and ages.