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The changing balance of wealth and power in rural Essex

from the dissolution of the monasteries to the fall of the
4th Duke of Norfolk, 1571

by Mark Marston Norris



'My Darling Miss Blake'

Governess to the Rosslyn family
in the late 19th century

Pamela Sambrook, p4



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How Early Did Christianity Reach Eastern England?

A Review Of The Evidence

Dr Martin Parsons FRGS, FHEA, MAE

In 1981 Peter Salway in his survey of Roman Britain observed that in relation to Christian origins in Britain "*it is generally unsatisfactory to rely on negative evidence.*"¹ However, in practice the absence of clear archaeological evidence has led to the dominance of an assumption that Christianity arrived relatively late, having slowly filtered into Britain by the end of the second century and thereafter gradually increased until the conversion of Constantine in 312 gave it a new degree of social acceptability.

The inherent problems with assuming a late arrival of Christianity in Britain

First, it fails to address the question of what sort of evidence it might be reasonable to expect in the first two centuries of Christianity.

Secondly, there is a tension between the assumption of the late arrival of Christianity in Britain and the existence of a highly organised church immediately after Constantine's 312CE conversion and the 313CE Edict of Milan agreeing religious toleration across the eastern and western empires. As Philip Crummy observes:

*"Evidence of early Christianity in Britain is fairly thin, and it is difficult to tell just how widespread its support turned out to be. However, just one year after the edict of Milan, we find three British bishops and representatives of a fourth attending a major ecclesiastical gathering in Gaul."*²

Thirdly, the external evidence suggests that Christianity was relatively well established in Britain by the end of the second century. Tertullian (160-225CE), a Roman lawyer and church leader in Carthage North Africa, appears to assume that his readers know that Christianity had by then i.e. turn of second/third centuries, reached even to those parts of the British Isles which were beyond the limits of Roman control i.e. Ireland and most of the area north of Hadrian's Wall.

*"...all the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and the haunts of the Britons—inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ...In all which places the name of the Christ who is already come reigns."*³

Similarly, the early church theologian Origen (c.185-254CE) in his commentary on Ezekiel probably

written in Palestine at some point between 232-55CE,⁴ implies it was then common knowledge that churches were widespread in the British Isles, which the Romans regarded as being on the very edge of the world. That knowledge of the British church had by the early third century reached both North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean respectively suggests a sizeable British church had existed for some time.

Fourthly, we have claims made by the earliest extant British church histories that Christianity arrived relatively early in Britain. Both Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* completed in 731 CE and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* written about a century and half later, but seemingly drawing on independent sources, refer to a mid-second century request to the bishop of Rome from "Lucius, king of the Britons" (presumably a vassal chieftain) for conversion.⁵ This should probably be interpreted as a request for Christian teachers, implying a specific evangelisation strategy. However, it also suggests that Christianity was sufficiently widespread in at least some parts of Britain for Lucius to make such a request. Although *The Ruin of Britain*, an admonitory sermon written by the monk Gildas around 540CE, has been criticised for somewhat implausibly claiming that Christianity arrived in Britain during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (14-37CE), it almost certainly does reflect a sixth century assumption that Christianity arrived in Britain during the early decades of Christianity.

The wider context of Church history

The absence of archaeological evidence for early Christianity in Britain needs to be viewed in the context of an almost total absence of such evidence in the first century and half of Christianity anywhere else, despite its evident geographical spread during this period. The explanation for this is almost certainly the fear of persecution.

Whilst Judaism was a legally recognised religion in the Roman Empire, a status which Christianity was

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Roman building materials were still readily to hand when the doorway to Holy Trinity church was constructed in the centro of Colchester, possibly around 1050 AD

briefly able to shelter beneath. Suetonius' reference to Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome because of tumults concerning "*Chresto*" (*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto adsidue tumultantes Rome expulit*)⁶ has been interpreted by NT scholars to mean that after the fifth decade of the first century CE tensions between Christians and Jews in Rome over whether Jesus was the Messiah (Gk. 'Christos') made the distinction more obvious. Christianity, thereafter, increasingly became an illicit religion even though formal state-sponsored persecution, which began under Nero (54-67CE) was far from continuous. Tacitus describes the "*refined torture*" Nero inflicted on Christians, as including being thrown to wild beasts, crucifixion and being set on fire as human torches to light Nero's gardens. He also implies that executions occurred in the Roman Circus with Nero himself dressed as a charioteer to oversee them.⁷

However, what is equally noteworthy is that Roman historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius not merely refer to the persecution of Christians but appear to reflect popular anti-Christian prejudice in the first half of the second century by suggesting it was justified. Tacitus (55-120CE) himself a Roman Senator and Consul describes the Christians persecuted by Nero as "*criminals who deserved*

exemplary punishment", while Suetonius (c.70-140CE), a high ranking official of the emperors Trajan (98-117CE) and Hadrian (117-38CE) describes the Christians Nero persecuted as "*a new and malicious superstition*".⁸ It could therefore reasonably be expected that Roman officials in Britain would have held similar attitudes towards Christians. Indeed, **Gnaeus Julius Agricola** (40-93CE), Roman governor of Britain between 77-84CE, was Tacitus's father-in-law.

Herein lies the first problem, which is that religious minorities which lack legal recognition do not normally leave visible evidence of their existence. We see the same pattern in more recent church history such as the almost total absence of dissenting chapels built prior to the 1689 Toleration Act in England, as well as in countries today such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia where Christians face persecution from state-actors. That is almost certainly why there is virtually no archaeological evidence anywhere for Christianity in the first century and what does possibly occur, such as *sator* squares, the fish symbolising a Christian mnemonic, and possibly pavement carvings pointing to a Pompei house where Christians met,⁹ have a somewhat cryptic character.

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We should not expect to find church buildings, because Christians met covertly in private houses or remote locations where they would be unlikely to be discovered. The only known example of a church 'building' anywhere in the Roman Empire before the 313 Edict of Milan is in fact part of the interior of a private house which has been converted into a worship space in the mid third century at Dura Europos on the Euphrates.¹⁰

The evidence we do have for early Christianity in the first century and first half of the second century is almost exclusively manuscript evidence of the New Testament, of which the earliest are papyri dated in the first decades of the second century.¹¹ However, all of these have been discovered in locations with extremely arid climates such as Egypt. By contrast, in Britain we have no extant manuscripts of any description, on any subject, from the first half of the first millennium.

In other words, the absence of archaeological finds of indisputably Christian pre-Constantinian artefacts, particularly in the first century and half of Christianity is part of a wider pattern across areas of the Mediterranean and Near East where Christianity clearly was established at the time.

The New Testament

The evidence we do have for first century Christianity is the record of early Church expansion in the New Testament (NT), particularly in the Acts of the Apostles, which is widely regarded by NT scholars as having a high degree of historical validity, regardless of whether or not one accepts the associated truth claims.¹² These depict the expansion of Christianity occurring in two main ways:

- i) through specific evangelisation strategies, such as the apostle Paul's missionary journeys which occurred between approximately 46-57CE initially to Cyprus and eastern Turkey, then westwards right across the area covered by modern Turkey into Europe and down to the south of Greece,¹³ with Paul repeatedly emphasising his intention to then travel to Spain, the Atlantic coastline which, as far as the Roman Empire was concerned, then constituted the "ends of the earth".¹⁴ There is an assumption by NT scholars, based in part on a number of second century church history texts¹⁵ that Paul was probably released from his first Roman imprisonment after two years, the imprisonment being variously dated between 59 and 64 CE, whereupon he undertook a missionary journey to Spain.¹⁶
- ii) through migration across the Roman Empire. The Acts of the Apostles cites Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome (many Christians being Jewish), which appears to have occurred at some point around 49 CE as being a particular cause of this. Acts 18:2 narrates that when Paul arrived at Corinth:

"There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome."

Such people appear to have been highly mobile. Aquila, moved from the Roman province of Pontus on the Black Sea coast to Rome, then to Corinth and later accompanied Paul to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19,26). Then after the death of Claudius he returned to Rome (Romans 16:3), but later returned to living in Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:19) possibly due to persecution in Rome.

The churches established in major urban centres by either of these approaches, appear to have then planted churches within their region. For example, Paul himself does not appear to have planted the church at Colossae to which he addressed his letter to the Colossians, but it was probably established from the church at Ephesus and in turn oversaw the planting of the churches at nearby Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 2:1; 4:13). Similarly, the Church at Rome, which appears to have been established primarily by migration, appears to have established the church at Pute'oli, around 30 miles from Pompei (Acts 28:13-14).

In other words, in the space of two decades the Christian church spread right across the Mediterranean world to the Atlantic coast, not merely in the major centres visited by Paul, but almost certainly as a local church planting movement carried out both by specific evangelisation strategies and by informal migration of Christians across the empire, some at least of which were highly mobile.

This forms the context against which we have to consider hypotheses related to the arrival of Christianity in Britain. The question therefore arises as to whether it is credible that Christianity having raced right across the Roman Empire to reach the Atlantic coastline by the late 60sCE suddenly came to a juddering halt and did not in any form reach Britain for roughly another century?

Could Christian craftsmen and merchants have come to the new Roman Colonia of Colchester?

The issue becomes acute when one considers:

- i) that historians and archaeologists reconstructing the early Roman history of Colchester are drawing on the same Roman historians (particularly Tacitus and Suetonius) as NT scholars reconstructing the background to the Acts of Apostles.
- ii) that Claudius's conquest of Britain in 43CE and establishment of the Roman colony at what is now Colchester in 49CE happened immediately before and during this westward expansion of the church across the Roman Empire, described in the NT.

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An intriguing possibility arises from the date of the establishment of Colchester as a Roman Colonia in 49CE. The date is in the same timeframe as Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome. The account of Suetonius, archaeological evidence related to the dating of Gallio's proconsulship of Achaia (Acts 18:12) and the early church historian Orosius, point to the expulsion happening in 49CE,¹⁷ i.e. the same year in which Colchester became a Colonia.

It is likely that the entire Jewish-Christian element of the church at Rome was forced to leave Rome, as the context of Paul's letter to the Romans appears to be addressing issues caused by the return of Jewish-Christians after the death of Claudius (54CE) to a church which had been exclusively Gentile-Christians for several years. The question therefore arises as to where Jewish-Christians involved in trade would have gone when ordered to leave Rome. Given that Claudius' conquest of Britain in 43CE, succeeding where Julius Caesar had failed, would have been the talk of the Roman Empire, it is likely that the establishment of Colchester as the empire's newest Colonia in 49CE would have been well known in Rome.

The close proximity of the date of the expulsion with the founding of Colchester as the empire's newest Colonia, raises at least the possibility of whether any such traders migrated here – although the absence of evidence from the period, means that this can never be stated as more than a possibility to be considered. Moreover, even if any such Christians had left any indications of their presence in Colchester, any such evidence would almost certainly have been destroyed in the Boudican revolt of 60-61CE.

As we earlier noted, Gildas reflects a sixth century belief that Christianity arrived in Britain during the earliest decades of Christianity. Although he somewhat implausibly refers to this happening during "*the last days of Tiberius Caesar*". However, it is possible that Gildas has confused the emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus (14-37CE) with¹⁸ the emperor Tiberius Claudius Caesar (41-54CE). In which case, this is a more plausible scenario involving the migration of Christians across the Roman Empire, for the reasons set out above, with Colchester, as the empire's newest Colonia, being a possible destination. This would then be in the latter part of Claudius reign (i.e. 49-54CE).

This would also be consistent with the claim made by both Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that in the second half of the second century Lucius, a British king wrote to the bishop of Rome requesting conversion. Given the second century hostility of Roman officialdom towards Christianity, the request for conversion would only make sense if there was already a Christian presence in Britain.

Early bishop of Colchester?

The possibility that Christianity may have existed in eastern Britain in the first century and half of Christianity raises a further issue. The list of attendees at the Council of Arles in 314CE includes a bishop of the city of *Colonia Londinensium*:

"Eborius episcopus de civitate Eboracensi provincia Brittainia

Restitutus episcopus de civitate Londiensi provincia suprascripta

Adelphius episcopus de civitate Colonia Londinensium

Exinde Sacerdos presbyter Arminius diaconus.

[Eborius, Bishop of the city of York of the province of Britain.

Resitutus, Bishop of the city of London of the above-named province.

Adelphius, bishop of the city of Colonia Londinensium.

Furthermore, Sacerdos the priest and Arminius the deacon"].¹⁹

In a pioneering study of Christianity in Roman-Britain Toynbee argued in 1953 that this referred to Colchester, which as the senior Colonia in Britain was likely to have had a bishop, possibly the first such bishop in England.²⁰ However, more recently the assumption that Christianity slowly filtered into Britain at some point in the second half of the second century has favoured this being a reference to Lincoln, or possibly Cirencester due to Colchester's declining importance in the third century.²¹ However, if Christianity had arrived in Colchester in the first century, then it is extremely plausible that a bishopric would have emerged there.

However, it is unlikely that it survived the Anglo-Saxon invasions. Whilst there are a number of possible explanations for the destruction of Duncan's Gate in Colchester,²² a range of evidence points to widespread destruction of churches and church organisation following the Saxon invasions. Gildas describes the specific targeting of churches, with

"the inhabitants, along with the bishops of the church, both priests and people, whilst swords gleamed on every side and flames crackled, were together mown down to the ground." ²³

Similar descriptions are provided by Welsh poetic sources.²⁴ While Bede indicates that when Augustine landed in 597CE the nearest British bishops were in the Welsh border regions.²⁵

Conclusions

What is clear is that the absence of indisputably Christian archaeological evidence in the first two centuries is precisely what we would expect from a church forced to operate in the shadows and lacking legality. It is also the pattern found across much of the Roman Empire where Christianity clearly *did* exist. As such, it cannot be used to discount the accounts of historical sources indicating an earlier arrival of Christianity in Britain.

In fact, the idea that Christianity raced across the Mediterranean to the Atlantic coastline in the space of two decades, then came to a juddering halt for

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the next century or so, before slowly permeating to Britain towards the end of the second century lacks credibility. Indeed, the trading links between the new Colonia and the rest of the empire make it highly likely that it did arrive earlier, though more likely by individual migration than as a specific evangelisation strategy. Although it is impossible to know whether the founding of the Colonia in the same timeframe as Claudius expelled Jews from Rome led to the arrival of Jewish-Christian merchants, it is clearly a possibility that cannot be discounted.

Finally, this in itself adds a degree of plausibility to Toynbee's suggestion that Adelphius, the British representation at the 314CE Council of Arles, was a bishop of Colchester.

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End Notes:

¹ Peter Salway *Roman Britain* (Oxford:OUP,1981) 718.

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³ Tertullian *Adversus Judaeos* chapter 7, ET from Latin by S. Thelwall in Allan Menzies (ed) *Ante Nicene Fathers Volume 3 Latin Christianity: Its Founder Tertullian* (Buffalo,NY: Christian Literature Publishing,1885).

⁴ David J Halperin 'Origen, Ezekiel's Merkabah and the Ascension of Moses' *Church History* (1981) 50(3), 261-275.

⁵ Bede Ecclesiastical History of the English Book 1 chapter 4; Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 167CE.

⁶ Suetonius *The Twelve Caesars* Book 5 (Claudius) 25.

⁷ Tacitus *Annals* 15:44.

⁸ Tacitus *Annals* 15:44; Suetonius *The Twelve Caesars* Book 6 (Nero) 16.

⁹ Bruce W Longenecker *The Crosses of Pompeii: Jesus-devotion in a Vesuvian Town* (Minneapolis: Fortress,2016).

¹⁰ Michael Peppard *The World's Oldest Church* (New Haven and London: Yales University Press,2016) 12-20.

¹¹ P90, P104, P98, P52 (The Rylands fragment), while the recently published P157 has a date range of 150-250CE. There are approximately 5,800 early Greek NT MSS extant.

¹² For example, Craig L Blomberg *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (Nashville,TN:B&H Academic, 2016).

¹³ Acts 13:1-14:28 (first missionary journey); 15:36-18:22 (second missionary journey); 18:23-21:17 (third missionary journey).

¹⁴ Acts 13:47 (the ends of the earth); Romans 15:24, 28 (Spain).

¹⁵ *1 Clement* 5:5-7 (96CE); *Muratorian Canon* 34-39 (170-90CE).

¹⁶ For example, Ben Witherington III *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans/Carlisle:Paternoster, 1998) 788-93.

¹⁷ See the discussion in F.F. Bruce *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mi:Eerdmans/

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¹⁸ Gildas *The Ruin of Britain* 8.

¹⁹ ET in David Petts 'Christianity in Roman Britain' in Martin Millett, Louise Revell and Alison Moore *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2015) 660-81.

²⁰ J.M.C. Toynbee 'Christianity in Roman Britain' *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*

3rd series 16:1-24 cited in Dorothy Watts *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 1991, 2014) 13, n2 235.

²¹ Dorothy Watts *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* 74 gives all 3 possibilities.

²² Philip Crummy *City of Victory* 130-31.

²³ Gildas *The Ruin of Britain* 24.

²⁴ The *Canu Heledd* of John Davies *A History of Wales* (Penguin, 1990, revised edn 2007) 61-62.

²⁵ Bede *Ecclesiastical History* Book 2 chapter 2.

In Brief



Image above:

The Portable Antiquities Scheme has received an unusual trader's token dating to 1666, 19.5mm in diameter.

The obverse shows three tobacco pipes with the legend in the border: '+ MILES . HACKLVITT. 1666.' The reverse continues the legend: 'HIS HALFE PENNY. + IN . BILREKEY. IN. ESSEX'. This spelling of 'Billericay' is no more outlandish than many others - Bulerycay in 1539 AD and Billyrecha in 1436 according to Reaney's *Place-Names of Essex*. The pipes are said to show that the issuer was a churchwarden. The reference is ESS-3FF1DA.