

The Roman Army and the Conversion of Northern Britain

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The Christian church in late Roman Britain is usually seen as a largely urban phenomenon, but there is increasing archaeological evidence of a late Roman Christian 'hot spot' along Hadrian's Wall, which seems to date from the time of the Theodosian reorganization of the northern defences of the British provinces, following the near collapse of Roman rule in 367. We also have evidence for the Christianization of the lands immediately north of the Wall from the late fourth century onwards. This article argues that this Christianization seems to be part of a deliberate policy by the imperial government to draw the British tribes north of Hadrian's Wall more securely into the oikumene (the whole civilized Roman world, now further united by Christianity) as a means of securing the frontier. This article also examines how, as a by-product of this policy, the logistics chain running south from the Wall into what is now north-west England may then have served as a conduit for Christianity from the border region into Britannia proper, as well as exploring its later impact on the development of Christian Northumbria.

This study has its genesis, at least in part, in a paper given by Shaun Church at the 2024 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society, which looked (*inter alia*) at early Christianity on the Roman frontier.¹ In this, he drew attention to the evidence for early Christian churches in a series of forts along Hadrian's Wall, most notably at Vindolanda (Chesterholme near Hexham), where the first evidence of a Christian church is currently dated to around 370–400.² This was

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¹ Shaun Church, 'Experiencing Christian Sacred Space in the Roman Frontier Zones of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries', in David Ceri Jones, Peter Marshall and Charlotte Methuen, eds, *Margins and Peripheries in Christian History*, SCH 61 (Cambridge, 2025), 12–47.

² Andrew Birley and Marta Alberti, *Vindolanda Excavation Research Report: Focussing on Post-Roman Vindolanda* (Hexham, 2021), 12, 48–9.

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followed by a whole series of somewhat later apsidal structures, one of which is associated with the Vindolanda chalice.³ A possible church at Birdoswald is linked by Tony Wilmot to a rebuilding of the fort following the Theodosian restoration of the frontier, again dated to around 370;⁴ while a small apsidal structure at Housesteads, with an adjacent, possibly baptismal, tank seems to be connected to an earthen rampart dating from 350 or later. Alan Rushworth, however, argues that this is more likely to post-date the end of the Roman military establishment as it overlies Building 1 on the site.⁵ A possible tabletop altar from *Arbeia* (South Shields) may also date from as early as the fourth century, though this is less certain.⁶ Evidence of Christian or christianized Roman silverware has also emerged from Corbridge.⁷

Archaeology can only rarely offer us the sort of precise dating one might hope to glean from a written record, particularly at this period; indeed, the patterns of coin usage and the dating of pottery evidence are still subjects for debate.⁸ Often the significance of archaeological features is open to a variety of interpretations, and when a feature is interpreted or dated by reference to apparently 'known' history, there is the danger of a circular argument developing whereby the find is then used as evidence supporting that particular understanding of history.

In each of the individual cases described above, the evidence is open to other interpretations. However, cumulatively, the evidence for what one might describe as a late Roman Christian 'hot spot' along the Wall seems highly suggestive. Traditionally, the late Roman church has been seen as an essentially urban phenomenon: all the British bishops or their representatives attending the Council of Arles in 314 can

³ Birley and Alberti, *Vindolanda*, 12; for illustrations of the chalice (find SF22145), see *ibid.* 120–1 (plates 12 and 13).

⁴ Tony Wilmot, *Birdoswald Roman Fort* (Stroud, 2001), 119.

⁵ Alan Rushworth, *Housesteads Roman Fort: The Grandest Station*, 2 vols (Swindon, 2009), 1: 321–2.

⁶ Rob Collins, *Hadrian's Wall and the End of Empire* (Abingdon, 2012), 104.

⁷ Charles Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), 113. See also M. C. Bishop and J. N. Dore, *Corbridge: Excavations of the Roman Fort and Town* (London, 1988), 159, for discussion of a ring with a possible Christian inscription.

⁸ See, for instance, Caitlin Green, *Britons and Anglo-Saxons: Lincolnshire AD 400–650* (Lincoln, 2020), xviii–xxiv; and Rob Collins, 'Pleading the Fifth (Century): Patterns of Coin Use at the End of Empire', in *idem* and Matthew Symonds, eds, *Breaking Down Boundaries: Hadrian's Wall in the 21st Century* (Portsmouth, 2013), 123–34.

plausibly be linked to the urban administrative centres of the four provinces of the diocese. However, we know from the *Confessio*, St Patrick's autobiographical testimony of faith, that Patrick's father, Calpurnius, was a deacon and also a decurion, a member of the governing class of the local *civitas*, or tribal community.⁹ There is as yet no consensus regarding the precise location of that *civitas*.¹⁰ However, Patrick's capture by pirates takes place on a rural estate belonging to his family known as *Bannavem taburniae* and a strong case can be made for this lying in the area immediately to the south of Hadrian's Wall, perhaps in the area of Birdoswald (*Banna*) or Ravensglass (*Glannoventa*).¹¹ Whichever of these locations is preferred (unless one were to opt for a quite different location around Chester or the south-west of England), Patrick would have grown up within the *civitas Carvetiorum* (the tribal community of the Carvetii), and his family's urban base, where Calpurnius carried out his political functions, would have been in Carlisle. Not only was Patrick's father a deacon, but his grandfather was also a priest, which would seem to push the date for a functioning church structure in the Carlisle area back to around the 380s, if not earlier. This likely Christian presence in Carlisle, together with the evidence from the Wall, raises the question of the role of the Roman army in the spread of Christianity in the North. Was the growth of Christianity in this region simply an extension of its growth in other, more urbanized areas further south in Britannia, or did the concentration of military establishments along the frontier substantially contribute to the impetus towards Christianization? More intriguingly, was Christianization actually promoted by the imperial authorities as an arm of military policy, over and above the more general process in this period of establishing Christianity as the official religion of the empire?¹²

⁹ Patrick, *Confessio* 1; ET: 'Confession', transl. Pádraig McCarthy (2011), online at: <https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english>, accessed 24 October 2025. Patrick, *Epistola ad milites Corotici* 10; ET: 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus', transl. Pádraig McCarthy (2011), online at: <https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/epistola_english>, accessed 24 October 2025.

¹⁰ The issue is discussed at length in Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 310–14. See also Nicholas Higham and Barri Jones, *The Carvetii* (Stroud, 1985), 127–8.

¹¹ Tony Wilmot, *Birdoswald Roman Fort* (Stroud, 2001), 231; Higham and Jones, *The Carvetii*, 128.

¹² For these developments, see, for instance, Bill Leadbetter, 'From Constantine to Theodosius (and Beyond)', in Philip F. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World* (London, 2017), 237–40, at 220–43.

Evidence from Cockerham, near Lancaster, of the pagan cult of Nodens is most plausibly linked to the transfer to that area of naval forces previously based in the Bristol Channel, an area where the cult of Nodens is known to have been strong.¹³ This transfer of naval forces seems to have taken place in around 330–40, suggesting that, at least as late as the 340s, overt paganism was still quite acceptable in official military circles in the North. However, the excavators at Vindolanda suggest that the altar to Jupiter Dolichenus found there,¹⁴ was cast down around 370, and pagan altars were reused as paving stones for the path to the praetorium church in the years immediately following,¹⁵ thus giving a fairly narrow time-frame for an apparent change in attitudes amongst the military authorities.¹⁶

One might suggest that the increasing influence of Christians within civilian society in the diocese of Britannia might have had an impact upon the military authorities on the frontiers. However, the chronology does not seem to support this. Bearing in mind that the second pagan temple complex at Uley, Gloucestershire, dates to the late fourth century, and was destroyed and replaced by a church only around 400–2, and that the Walbrook Mithraeum was only dismantled in the mid-fourth century,¹⁷ it seems unlikely that sufficient momentum would have built up amongst Christians in the more demilitarized, southern parts of the diocese to bring about such change on the northern frontier. What, then, might have brought about this change?

The middle decades of the fourth century saw the Roman frontier in Britain hit by a series of crises. In 342, the militantly Christian emperor Constans (337–50) led an emergency expedition to Britain to

¹³ David Shotter, *Romans and Britons in N.W. England* (Lancaster, 2004), 162–3.

¹⁴ Birley and Alberti, *Vindolanda*, 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁶ The situation may be less clear-cut than it seems. At Carrawburgh, the last coins deposited at Coventina's Well date to 378–88, with one example from the reign of Honorius (395–423), though this would reflect fairly low-key private devotion: L. Allason-Jones and B. McKay, *Coventina's Well* (Gloucester, 1985). See also Roger White, *Britannia Prima* (Stroud, 2007), 231. The excavators of the Mithraeum at Carrawburgh believed it was desecrated and abandoned before 350, but argued that this was most probably the result of unofficial action by a local authority: I. A. Richmond and Gilliam J. Pearson, 'The Temple of Mithras at Carrawburgh', *Archaeologia Aeliana* 4th series 29 (1951), 1–92.

¹⁷ Peter Leach and Ann Woodward, *The Uley Shrines: Excavation of a Ritual Complex on West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire 1977–9* (Swindon, 1993), 318. See also *ibid.* 317 for a discussion of the Walbrook Mithraeum.

deal with a challenge so serious it justified crossing the Channel in the depths of winter. Ammianus Marcellinus's account of this episode does not survive, but, writing of a further crisis in 360, he recalls how the earlier one had been occasioned by the Picts attacking the tribes to their south, right up to Hadrian's Wall, in breach of a treaty with the Romans.¹⁸ The implication is that some Roman authority, probably Constans, had negotiated a treaty under which the Romans gave a measure of protection to the British tribes between Hadrian's Wall and the Forth-Clyde line. Ammianus also seems to suggest that Constans organized, or reorganized, a force called the *areani* or *arcani* to police this buffer zone, but that, in the great 'Barbarian Conspiracy' of 367, which threatened Roman rule across the whole diocese, this force went over to the Pictish side.¹⁹

The situation was brought back under control by an expedition led by Count Theodosius (father of the future emperor), a staunch Christian, who disbanded the *arcani* and reorganized the defences of the northern frontier. Though there appears to have been some rebuilding at Risingham and Bewcastle (in the latter case, two phases of rebuilding) earlier in the fourth century, the outpost forts seem to have been abandoned following the 367 disaster.²⁰ It is to this period that much of the development of Christian infrastructure along the line of Hadrian's Wall seems to date. In itself, this is not such a surprising development. One might attribute it either to Theodosius's personal convictions, or perhaps to a belief, within Christian circles, that the barbarian conspiracy was God's punishment for religious laxity. However, there are indications that Christianity played an even more central part in Theodosius's plans.

An important feature of the Theodosian reorganization seems to have involved placing greater reliance upon the British tribes north of the Wall as a first line of defence. The most recent work on the Traprain Law hoard, found near Haddington, East Lothian, for instance, suggests that it was not loot, but hack silver, deliberately broken up to use in payment, probably as a diplomatic gift or subsidy to the Votadini, a tribe whose territory covered much of modern

¹⁸ A memory of this episode may lie behind Gildas's comments in *De Excidio*, which echo Ammianus's phrase about the raiders coming right up to the Wall itself: Gildas, *De Excidio* 19.1–2; ET: *The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*, ed. and transl. Michael Winterbottom (Chichester, 1978), 23.

¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 20.1, 27.8, 28.3.

²⁰ Guy de la Bédoyère, *Hadrian's Wall* (Stroud, 1998), 120.

south-east Scotland and Northumberland.²¹ However, the imperial authorities do not seem to have relied solely on financial subsidies to win over the tribes beyond the Wall. There are also indications of a strategy of linking those tribes more securely into the Roman world: effectively bringing them within the *oikumene*. The Romans seem already to have created centres within the formal diocese of Britannia for tribal groupings which extended beyond its bounds. The centre for the *civitas Carvetiorum*, probably created by 223 during the reign of Emperor Severus Alexander, was almost certainly Carlisle, and we have strong evidence that the *civitas* possessed all the normal structures of Roman civil government. However, Nicholas Higham and Barri Jones convincingly argue that the tribal area of the Carvetii extended well beyond the frontier as defined by the Wall.²² At Whithorn, in south-west Scotland, excavation has produced fragments of second- and third-century Roman pottery and other Roman artefacts, as well as indications of earlier British occupation, suggesting possible Roman or Romano-British influence on the site prior to its becoming a Christian centre. However, as Maldonado points out, there seems to be a tradition there of using fragments of Roman material as grave goods, so this cannot be said definitely to point to Romano-British activity in the area.²³ Further to the east, the Roman name for Corbridge, *Coria*, meaning a hosting place or the centre for a *pagus* (a subdivision of a tribal area or *civitas*), suggests that Corbridge too was the centre for a *civitas* extending well beyond the frontier. David Breeze suggests that it might have been a southern centre for the Votadini, though the Lopocares and the Textoverdi are also possible tribal groups which might have had Corbridge as a focus.²⁴ Post-370, however, the new element which Theodosius brings into the equation seems to be the fostering of Christianity amongst these northern British tribes.

²¹ Barbara Niemeyer, 'Review of *The Late Roman Silver Treasure from Traprain Law*, ed. Fraser Hunter, Annemarie Kaufmann-Heinimann and Kenneth Painter (Edinburgh, 2022)', *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 45 (2023), 98–100. See also Nicholas Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1992), 87.

²² Higham and Jones, *The Carvetii*, 12–13.

²³ Adrián D. Maldonado Ramírez, 'Christianity and Burial in Late Iron Age Scotland, AD 400–650' (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011), 182–3, 197; online at: <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2700/>>, accessed 18 June 2025.

²⁴ David J. Breeze, 'Civil Government in the North: The Carvetii, Brigantes and Rome', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* 3rd series 8 (2008), 63–72.

Bede's account of St Nynia's mission is well known,²⁵ but is frustratingly lacking in any indication of dates.²⁶ The memorial stones at Kirkmadrine and at Whithorn, which form our earliest physical evidence of Christianity north of the Wall, are difficult to date with any degree of precision beyond the fifth century, but Charles Thomas argues that the missionary activity associated with St Nynia must have begun in around 390–400. The rationale for this dating is partly to allow for the development of an episcopal see for Viventius and Mavorius, described on their memorial at Kirkmadrine as bishops (*sancti et praecipui sacerdotes*),²⁷ and for the supposed three generations of Christians implied by the monument to Latinus and his daughter from Whithorn. One might add to this that Bede speaks of Nynia converting the southern Picts, yet in his *Letter to Coroticus*, dateable to the 470s at the latest, Patrick refers to the 'apostate Picts', meaning one also has to allow time both for their conversion and their reversion to paganism. It is clear from Patrick's letter that Coroticus and his warband were at least nominally Christian and, since there is every reason to believe that Coroticus's kingdom was on the Clyde, one also has to allow time for Christianity to reach the Forth-Clyde line. This conclusion is reinforced by the mid-fifth-century memorial stone commemorating Vetta, daughter of Victricius, associated with an early Christian cemetery at Kirkliston on the south side of the Forth.²⁸

In addition, a sixth-century memorial inscription to one Coninia was found close to an enigmatic site in Kirkhope (Tweeddale) known as St Gordian's Chapel. Gordian was a martyr in Rome during the reign of Julian the Apostate (360–3), but no manuscript of his *Vita* survives from before the ninth century,²⁹ although Michael Lapidge dates the original version as probably from the seventh century.³⁰

²⁵ Bede uses the form *Nynia* for the name of the churchman he considers first brought Christianity to the tribes north of Hadrian's Wall, as do Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, and Tim Clarkson, *The Men of the North* (Edinburgh, 2010). I have followed this usage rather than the more popular *Ninian* (or *Nynian* which is sometimes found).

²⁶ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* [hereafter: *HE*] 3.4; ET: Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins, transl. Bertram Colgrave (Oxford, 1999), 115.

²⁷ Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 283–5.

²⁸ Clarkson, *Men of the North*, 51–2.

²⁹ Mathieu Pignot, 'Cult of Saints', entry E04567, online at: <<http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E04567>>, accessed 22 October 2025.

³⁰ Michael Lapidge, *The Roman Martyrs: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford, 2018), 494–5.

Unless there was an earlier form of the *Vita* which does not survive, or the name of this fairly obscure martyr was associated with an existing early Christian site at some later date, the simplest explanation would seem to be that the origins of the site lie in the late fourth or early fifth century, when Gordian's martyrdom was still a matter of recent memory. This would reinforce the argument for a relatively early date for Nynia's mission and the spread of Christianity in the intervallate area, between the Hadrianic and Antonine walls.³¹

Bede's assertion that Nynia's church at Whithorn was dedicated to St Martin has sometimes led to the suggestion that this points towards its having been founded in the early fifth century, Martin having died in 397.³² In the scenario which I have set out, one might postulate a particular enthusiasm for Martin, the Roman soldier saint, amongst the Wall garrison, though the apocalyptic emphases in Martin's ministry might have made those in authority less enthusiastic. However, back in 1954, Owen Chadwick seriously questioned whether the dedication to St Martin could be original, arguing that there is no evidence that even Martin's own church at Tours was known as St Martin's until 461, and that the use of this saint's name as a dedication only spread after that date. Chadwick's theory was that St Martin's at Canterbury had been dedicated under Frankish influence, and that the use of this dedication had been brought to Northumbria by Frankish influenced clerics, with Whithorn receiving this dedication only in the seventh century or later, when it passed under Northumbrian control.³³

This argument is, however, not entirely satisfactory. If one lists from Taylor and Taylor's survey of churches containing Anglo-Saxon fabric all those churches dedicated to St Martin and then omits Kentish churches (because of the well attested links between that area and Merovingian Gaul), one is left with Whithorn itself, two churches in Lincolnshire, one in Norfolk, one in Wiltshire, one in Dorset and one in the North Riding of Yorkshire.³⁴ This does not account for later changes in dedication; nor does it take into account churches with medieval dedications to St Martin where any Anglo-Saxon material has

³¹ Clarkson, *Men of the North*, 52–3.

³² See Charles Thomas's dismissive comment on John Morris and others who propose this: Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 281.

³³ Owen Chadwick, 'The Evidence of Dedications in the Early History of the Welsh Church', in Norah K. Chadwick, ed., *Studies in Early British History* (Cambridge, 1954), 173–88, at 179, 181–2.

³⁴ H. M. Taylor and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1965–78).

either been lost or was not identified until after Taylor and Taylor composed their magnum opus. Even with these caveats, however, there would seem to be no evidence of any particular enthusiasm for dedications to St Martin in Northumbria in the Anglo-Saxon period. Even the Yorkshire example, at Bulmer, is a church with only very late Saxo-Norman fabric. Curiously enough, on the other hand, excavations at St Martin in the Fields, London, have produced a late Roman burial, suggesting it has its origins as a late Roman extra-mural church.³⁵ At Ancaster, Lincolnshire, where the parish church is also dedicated to St Martin, there is strong evidence for a late Roman town and a very early Anglo-Saxon cemetery associated with it, which seems to point towards continuity of use and indeed continuity of function as a 'central place'.³⁶ It should be said that excavation at Trusty's Hill, a high status site close to Whithorn, has produced evidence of links to Merovingian Gaul from 600 onwards and possibly earlier, providing a possible alternative source of Frankish influence on the area prior to the Northumbrian conquest.³⁷ That does not, however, account for the apparent evidence for links between some early medieval dedications to St Martin and late Roman religious activity.

Even if it is accepted that the mission of Nynia is dateable to the late fourth or early fifth centuries, this would not, on its own, necessarily link the spread of Christianity to Roman imperial defence policy. A reading of the *Epistola* of St Patrick does, however, strongly suggest such a link. Addressing the soldiers of Coroticus, who have been engaged in slave raids upon Patrick's own converts, the saint writes:

With my own hand I have written and put together these words to be given and handed on and sent to the soldiers of Coroticus. I cannot say that they are my fellow-citizens, nor fellow-citizens of the saints of Rome [or 'of the holy Romans'], but fellow-citizens of demons, because of their evil works.³⁸

³⁵ Nicholas J. Higham, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (New Haven, CT, 2013), 48–9; Alison A Telfer, *St Martin-in-the-Fields Church, St Martin's Place, London, WC2, City of Westminster: A Post-Excavation Assessment and Updated Project Design* (London, 2009), 25, online at: *Archaeology Data Service*: <<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/issue.xhtml?recordId=1119897&recordType=GreyLitSeries>>, accessed 24 October 2025.

³⁶ Green, *Britons and Anglo-Saxons*, 45, 62.

³⁷ Ronan Toolis and Christopher Bowles, *The Lost Dark Age Kingdom of Rheged: The Discovery of a Royal Stronghold at Trusty's Hill Galloway* (Oxford, 2017).

³⁸ 'Manu mea scripsi atque condidi uerba ista danda et tradenda, militibus mittenda Corotici non dico ciuibus meis neque ciuibus sanctorum Romanorum sed ciuibus

Clearly, Patrick is implying that had Coroticus's men not indulged in such evil deeds, he would have considered them to be not only fellow citizens with him, but also fellow citizens of the holy Romans.

There is no reason to believe that Patrick actually came from the area ruled by Coroticus, so the only logical conclusion is that Patrick either has a somewhat anachronistic understanding of British nationhood, which includes tribes living on the Clyde, or that he considered both himself and them to be fellow citizens of the Roman *oikumene*. It may be argued that the shared citizenship to which Patrick alludes is simply the citizenship of the kingdom of heaven, a shared Christian faith. However, although he speaks frequently in the *Epistola* of his Irish converts as Christians, at no point does he suggest that they have any sort of shared citizenship, even though it might actually have been in keeping with his theme. Nor is there any such reference in the *Confessio*. Patrick is appealing here not simply to a shared Christian faith, but to a shared *Romanitas*, of which he seems to have viewed being a Christian as a central aspect. In this, Patrick is echoing a growing tendency across the Roman world from the mid-fourth century onwards, associated with the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the empire, to see Christianity and *Romanitas* as in a sort of symbiotic relationship.³⁹ He also prefigures the attitude of Gildas, the sixth-century British writer of *De Excido Britanniae* (*The Ruin of Britain*), who continues to use *cives* ('citizens') for the Christian British, in opposition to the pagan barbarian Saxons and to those British who have allied themselves with them.⁴⁰ Though Christopher Snyder has argued that Gildas differs from Patrick, being more reluctant to identify Christianity with *Romanitas*,⁴¹ Gildas's hostility towards the memory of the usurping British emperor Magnus Maximus (383–8) in *De Excido* 13, where he regards the usurper as unholy (when, in fact, we know him to have been staunchly Catholic), suggests that Gildas, too, regarded loyalty to Rome as an aspect of loyalty to the Christian faith.⁴²

daemoniorum, ob mala opera ipsorum': Patrick, *Epistola* 2 ('Letter', transl. Pádraig McCarthy).

³⁹ Andrew Louth, 'Unity and Diversity in the Church of the Fourth Century', in R. N. Swanson, ed., *Unity and Diversity in the Church*, SCH 32 (Oxford, 1996), 1–17, at 14–15.

⁴⁰ Gildas, *De Excido* 26.1 (*The Ruin of Britain*, ed. and transl. Winterbottom, 28 [English], 98 [Latin]). Winterbottom translates *cives* as 'our countrymen' rather than 'citizens'.

⁴¹ Christopher Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants* (Stroud, 1998), 79.

⁴² Peter Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 402–11.

It may be that the fact that at least some of the tribes on the northern side of the Wall straddled the frontier and had southern centres such as Carlisle and Corbridge made it easier for the imperial authorities to envisage them as *cives*, sharing a common *Romanitas* and a common faith with the inhabitants of Britannia proper. This would contrast to Roman attitudes to the barbarians beyond the Rhine. There, toleration by the Roman authorities of the heretical Arian Christianity of the Gothic tribes from the 380s onwards was justified precisely on the grounds that these were barbarians rather than Romans.⁴³ It should be noted, however, that the pagan Gothic leader Fritigern converted to Christianity in 376–7 as part of an alliance with Emperor Valens against dissidents within his own tribe; and that the leader of those dissidents, Athanaric, subsequently converted to Christianity and was baptized as part of his acceptance of the authority of Emperor Theodosius II in 381.⁴⁴ Thus, while paganism or a heretical form of Christianity might have been regarded as acceptable for a barbarian ally, it would not, it would seem, have been regarded as acceptable for those accepting the authority of the emperor. This, of course, has significance for the way the imperial authorities viewed the tribes beyond the Wall.

As for the Franks, while individuals serving in the Roman army may have become Christian, and a substantial body of Frankish troops did indeed serve the Emperor Julian (not, obviously, someone likely to encourage conversion to Christianity), there is no evidence for Frankish tribes being granted a formal status within the empire as *foederati* (barbarians serving the empire under a treaty or *foedus*) until around the middle of the fifth century, when the late Roman general and sometime de facto ruler of the Western empire, Aetius, entered into a treaty arrangement with the Rhineland Franks. By this stage, a requirement to accept Christianity seems not to have been an issue. That said, in the later part of the century, a letter from Bishop Remigius of Rheims to the young Clovis on the occasion of his becoming ruler of Belgica Secunda urges Clovis (as far as we know, still a pagan) to pay attention to ‘your bishops’; while Clovis’s father

⁴³ R. W. Mathisen, ‘Barbarian “Arian” Clergy, Church Organisation and Church Practices’, in Guido M. Berndt and Roland Steinacher, eds, *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (Farnham, 2014), 145–92, at 147–8.

⁴⁴ John A. McGuckin, *The Path of Christianity: The First Thousand Years* (Downers Grove, IL, 2017), 429. In Fritigern’s case, this meant becoming an Arian, as that was the form of Christianity favoured by Valens.

Childeric, an ally of the Christian Gallo-Roman ruler Aegidius, is said to have been a benefactor of the church.⁴⁵ This suggests at least a desire on the part of these Frankish rulers to be seen as patrons of the church. While Clovis did not formally convert until towards the end of the fifth century, his doing so can be seen as a way of legitimizing his rule in the eyes of the Gallo-Roman population at a time of conflict with the Arian Visigoths.⁴⁶

Turning to the East, an approach more akin to that of Count Theodosius (albeit at a much later date) can be found in the self-consciously Christian army of Byzantine Emperor Tiberius II (578–82). Helen Gittos has recently suggested that service by members of the Anglo-Saxon warrior elite as mercenaries in that army during the campaign against Sassanid Persia in 575 might have both introduced these warriors to Christianity and fostered an interest in *Romanitas*, which one might otherwise have expected by this stage to have been waning in the Anglo-Saxon dominated parts of Britain.⁴⁷

In the past, the crop of Roman names found in the genealogies of British chieftains north of Hadrian's Wall were often presented as evidence of military arrangements analogous to *foederati*, by which these chiefs engaged their tribes to serve the Romans in defence of the frontier in exchange for pay or some other recompense.⁴⁸ In itself, the *foederati* model was a little odd, since *foederati* were normally barbarians who were given land within the empire in return for military service, whereas these tribes remained in their own territories. However, this interpretation was also closely linked to the story in the *Historia Brittonum*, the ninth-century Welsh history ascribed to Nennius, that Cunedda of the Votadini led his people down from the north to drive the Irish out of north Wales. Unfortunately, the decline in belief in the historicity of the *Historia Brittonum* has inevitably brought with it a greater degree of scepticism about Cunedda and the whole idea of tribes north of the Wall being recruited as *foederati*. More recently, the spread of Roman names amongst the tribal elites of what is now southern Scotland has tended to be seen

⁴⁵ Edward James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1988), 65.

⁴⁶ Gabriel Fournier, *Les Mérovingiens* (Paris, 1978), 10. See also Lucien Musset, *The Germanic Invasions*, transl. Edward and Columba James (London, 1975), 77.

⁴⁷ Helen Gittos, 'Sutton Hoo and Syria: The Anglo-Saxons who served in the Byzantine Army', *EHR* 139 (2025), 1323–58.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, the discussion of Cunedda in Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 37–8, 124–9.

simply as a function of the spread of Christianity.⁴⁹ This spread of the faith is rather taken as read, despite the well-known reluctance of the late Roman church to evangelize amongst the barbarians.⁵⁰ I would argue that both the spread of Roman names and the spread of Christianity are elements of the same policy of bringing the northern British tribes more securely within the *oikumene*, in order to create a zone of protection for the Roman diocese proper. Indeed, the concept of a shared Christian *Romanitas* arguably remained present amongst the Carvetii, the Votadini and the Clyde tribes long after the Western Roman empire had ceased to exist.

Whether all this points towards there being an element of truth in the story of Cuneda and his warriors being employed by some late or post-Roman authority to drive the Irish from north Wales goes beyond the scope of this article, although there does seem to be little archaeological evidence for a Votadinian involvement in the history of north Wales. There is, however, evidence of a link between the Christian communities of the Wall area and further south in what is today north-west England. In 1993, a metal detectorist found a late Roman brine pan at Shavington near Crewe, Cheshire, which seems to bear the inscription *Viventi [epis]copi* ('of Viventius the bishop'). Clearly, churchmen were involved in the Cheshire salt industry, since fragments of two other brine pans have been found at Henhull near Nantwich bearing the inscriptions *CVNITVS CLER* and *CVNITI CLE* ('[of] Cunitus the cleric'). This raises the question of where Viventius was bishop.⁵¹ A case has been made for Chester as the nearest sizeable Roman settlement. However, not only is there no evidence for a Bishop Viventius at Chester, there is no evidence for a bishop at Chester at all in the late or post-Roman periods. While several scholars have argued for a Christian centre in Chester linked to the martyrs Aaron and Julius,⁵² the study of these two martyrs by Andy

⁴⁹ David J. Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (London, 1976), 228.

⁵⁰ Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*, 97–8.

⁵¹ See 'Brit. 29.11. Salt Pan of Bishop Viventius', *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, online at: <<https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/Brit.29.11>>, accessed 1 November 2024. Compare also Shotter, *Romans and Britons*, 130.

⁵² Keith J. Matthews et al., *Chester Amphitheatre: Investigations Summer 2000* (Chester, 2001), 11, 107. Compare also Keith J. Matthews, 'Chester's Amphitheatre after Rome: A Centre for Christian Worship?', online at: <http://www.kmatthews.org/archaeology/chester_amphitheatre_post-roman.pdf>, accessed 30 June 2025; B. Hoffman, 'Where Have all the Soldiers Gone?', in P. Carrington, ed., *Deva Victrix* (Chester, 2002), 79–88, at 86–7.

Seaman quite convincingly establishes their place of martyrdom as Caerleon-upon-Usk.⁵³

While Viventius is not an uncommon Roman name, and this could be an otherwise unknown Bishop Viventius, the possibility should at least be considered that the Shavington brine pan is evidence that the Bishop Viventius commemorated on the Kirkmandrine stone was also active in late antique Cheshire. It is not difficult to envisage maritime links between south-west Scotland and north-west England at any period. It is also an interesting feature of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a catalogue of military units and their stations dating to around 390–420, that it lists the bases under the command of the *Dux Britanniarum* (the commander of the *limitanaei*, or garrison troops, in the province) in the north-east of England, followed by units stationed along the line of the Wall (*item per lineam valli*), before continuing – without a break or any new heading – by listing forts in modern Cumbria, Lancashire and north-west Yorkshire: Burgh by Sands, Kirkbride, Maryport, Workington, Bowness, Ravenglass, Lancaster, Ribchester, Elslack, and Brough-by-Bainbridge.⁵⁴ What this seems to suggest is that the Wall garrison was seen as having a hinterland, presumably a logistics chain, running down into north-west England. This suggests that a link between the Viventius of Shavington and the Viventius of Kirkmadrine is less improbable than might at first appear. The British churches granted to Wilfred in the 670s seem similarly to have occupied territories extending down the Ribble and the Lune from the Pennine watershed to the Irish Sea.

It may therefore be that Christianity spread southwards to modern Lancashire and Cheshire from a base in south-west Scotland and along Hadrian's Wall. Not only may late Roman military policy have facilitated the Christianization of the north British tribes, but late Roman military organizational structures may also have facilitated the creation of a common faith community around the eastern shores of the Irish Sea.

This then raises the question of the impact a continuing Christian community along Hadrian's Wall may have had on the later

⁵³ Andrew Seaman, 'Julius and Aaron "Martyrs of Caerleon"', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 164 (2015), 201–19, at 203–4 (for the location of the 'city of the legions') and 205–9 (for the suggested location of the *martyrium* of Aaron and Julius).

⁵⁴ Robert Vermaat, 'Notitia Dignitatum - British section (ca. AD 395–430)', *Vortigern Studies: British History 400–600*, ch. 40, 'Duke of the Britains', online at: <<http://www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/artsou/notitilist.htm>>, accessed 22 August 2024.

development of Christianity in Northumbria. Vindolanda is currently thought to have continued as a functioning settlement up to the ninth century.⁵⁵ In addition, Rob Collins has pointed out that *Abse* in the anonymous Life of Cuthbert can plausibly be identified with *Aesica* (Great Chesters), while *Urfe*, the birthplace of St Oswine, according to a Tynemouth tradition preserved by Leland, can be derived from *Arbeia*.⁵⁶ In each case, survival of the Roman name suggests a degree of continuity of occupation into the Anglo-Saxon period. This may also imply continuity of Christian practice. Did, for instance, Corbridge's Roman Christian past have any influence upon the creation of the monastery at Hexham, beyond the Roman fort providing a useful source for building material?

It is also worth noting that, while Bede clearly wishes to focus on Paulinus's role in the conversion of Edwin in 627, as part of the Roman mission to the English, he at no point actually states that Paulinus baptized Edwin, a role claimed for Rhun map Urbgen (presumably a member of the royal house of Rheged, a British kingdom probably around the Solway Firth) in the *Historia Brittonum*.⁵⁷ If this was indeed the case, then we have a direct link between the north British church, whose origins we have been exploring, and the development of Northumbrian Christianity. St Cuthbert's home monastery bore the British name *Mailros* (Old Melrose), and it is surely more likely that it was the product of a surviving British religious tradition rather than a Northumbrian creation. If that is the case, then that British tradition was continuing to feed into the Northumbrian church as late as the late seventh century, as well as providing Northumbria with one of its most notable saints.

The well-known reluctance of the late Roman church to undertake missionary work amongst barbarians beyond the boundaries of the empire has been mentioned above. Yet the spread of Christianity beyond Hadrian's Wall in the late antique period seems undeniable, whether or not one wishes to see it entirely as the result of Nynia's mission. The special circumstances arising from Theodosius's efforts to restore the northern frontier of the diocese of Britain, and the

⁵⁵ Birley and Alberti, *Vindolanda*, 71.

⁵⁶ Collins, *Hadrian's Wall*, 105.

⁵⁷ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum* 63; ET: Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and transl. John Morris (Chichester, 1980), 38 (English), 79 (Latin). Compare also *HE* 2.14 (*Ecclesiastical History*, ed. McClure and Collins, 97).

particular status which seems to attach to the tribes lying on either side of that frontier, provide a context in which the effort to Christianize the lands north of Hadrian's Wall can be understood.

This also raises questions about the proper understanding of the structures of late and post-Roman Christianity in Britain. An awareness of the development of such a Christian 'hot spot' around the Wall has the potential to cast new light upon the early development of Christianity in what is now north-west England, a topic which often seems shrouded in darkness. Because of the stress upon Roman Christianity as an urban phenomenon, there has been a tendency to assume that in rural areas paganism continued to be the norm, or that at best Christianity remained only a thin veneer, despite the fact that, amidst all his other complaints about the sins of the British, Gildas never mentions the issue of residual paganism. Yet the evidence from the north is that Christianity was already, by the end of the Roman period, developing structures based on the communities that grew up around military bases and on tribal groupings. This must call into question many of our assumptions about the dwindling away of Christianity in the face of urban decay and the impact of the Anglo-Saxon settlements.

The evidence, both archaeological and historical, for the continuing presence of British Christianity along the old Roman frontier zone, which persisted well into the Anglo-Saxon period, must surely lead to a reconsideration of the role of British Christianity in the later development of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria. It may be possible to discern, behind the blindness to British Christianity of Bede's narrative, a far more complex story of religious interaction between the British and the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Northumbria.

Furthermore, the evidence obliges us to reconsider the important role played by the Roman army on the northern frontier in the spread of Christianity amongst the northern British. Not only did its bases and the communities which grew up around them serve as incubators for the growth of Christian belief, but the military strategy adopted by the imperial authorities for the defence of the frontier played a key role in the spread of Christianity amongst the tribes beyond Hadrian's Wall. In its defence of a concept of Christian *Romanitas*, the Roman army in the North may have been more successful than has sometimes been thought.