England's Earliest Woman Writer and Other Studies on Dark-Age Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

England's Earliest Woman Writer (and so on) is this book's title, but a better one might be *Tales of the Unexpected*, for its thirteen chapters have many surprises. We start with the Anglo-Saxons. Chapter one's subject is an eighth-century Whitby nun, writing a life of Pope Gregory (and not finding it easy). Second comes Bede and an Irish monastery in Sussex, near ruins of a Roman palace (once home to a British kingling). In chapters three to five we encounter a Cornishman translating history for King Alfred (d. 899), alluding in his English text to the Celtic Other World and Cornish bards, as also to Pharoah's magicians, portents at Christ's birth, and goings-on in the bed of Olympias, Alexander the Great's mother. This part ends with the Exeter Book, a tenth-century collection of Old English poems including many baffling riddles. Solutions can yet be found here: a city gate, glass-blowing and glassware, hope, a guardian angel, altar vessels of gold, the royal lovers Ceyx and Alcyone. Together, they reveal the eternal wonder of poets at the world and (sometimes) their quiet humour on its men and women.

After that, seven chapters on Celtic Britain. Some are dramatic, for we begin with St Patrick (d. 461, not 491), enslaved by Irish raiders at his home of *Bannaventa Berniae* (‘market by uplands with a hill-gap’) or Banwell, north Somerset (its whereabouts demonstrated in the 1990s by Harry Jelley, local historian). As for chapter eight, its subject is harrowing. It brings us to the British-Latin writer Gildas (493-570) and his account of St Julius and St Aaron, both martyred (in the 250s?) at *Civitas Legorum* or Leicester and (despite what is said) not at *Legionum Urbs* or Caerleon, South Wales. Chapters nine to eleven bring us back to Cornwall. First are places like Stithians and St Enoder, named after Celtic or other saints: then the mysterious school of 'Rosnat', to be located at Old Kea, south-west of Truro; and then the equally mysterious 'Dindraithou', which will be the cliff-fortress of Trevelgue (near Newquay), where St Carannog allegedly met King Arthur and disposed of a troublesome dragon. After Carannog is St Cadog and further links between Wales and the south-west, with Cadog (allegedly) flying across the Bristol Channel to a monastery in Somerset,

the story being improved when the Somerset house was taken instead as one in Italy. We close with royal passion. Iunguoret, Queen of Strathclyde, had a lover, bestowing on him a ring given to her by her husband. But the King grew suspicious; the ring was removed by stealth and flung into the ocean; he then ordered the Queen to produce it. Turning in distraction to St Kentigern, she was through his prayers yet saved from infamy when (they say) that gold item was by a miracle found in the belly of a fish.

So, much variety: a woman writer, Irish monks juxtaposed by a Roman palace, a Cornish translator, riddles solved; piracy, death in the arena; saints, a school, a royal fortress, all located in Cornwall, plus a monastery in Somerset; a queen's folly (and her wondrous deliverance) in Dark Age Scotland. As an indication of further possibilities is another paper (not included here): 'Bishop Cenwald (d. 958) and *The Battle of Brunanburh*', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, xxviii (2022), 61-71. Its conclusion is that Sarah Foot (now Dean of Christ Church, Oxford) is correct in attributing *The Battle of Brunanburh* to Cenwald, Bishop of Worcester 928/9-58. Thanks to her, we discover a previously unknown Old English poet. His name can be added to those of Cædmon (in the 670s) and Cynewulf (active in around 800). Cenwald may even have witnessed Athelstan's victory of 937 over Viking and Scots invaders, whom the king attacked not far from the Roman fort (*burh*) of Lanchester, near the River Browney or *Brune* (whence *Brunanburh*) in hill country west of Durham (and not, as some imagine, at Bromborough in Cheshire).

Whether in light or shade, the above material brings us closer to people long ago. Hence reference throughout to publications on similar themes, both to correct errors in academic handbooks and to encourage research by others, especially younger scholars. Finally, acknowledgement of the efficient editors in Yorkshire, California, Devon (with *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*), Glamorgan, Siberia, Poland (*Quaestiones Medii Aevi*), Scotland. They published most of the material below (as shown by bibliographical citations); even if it has been rewritten, when necessary, in the light of work appearing since.

Andrew Breeze

ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

CHAPTER ONE

ENGLAND'S EARLIEST WOMAN WRITER AND WHITBY, YORKSHIRE

Amongst the oldest texts ever written in England is a Latin life of Pope Gregory I (d. 604). It is sometimes attributed to a female author, an unknown nun of Whitby; if so, it will be unique. It reveals how a woman saw life in early England, not least as regards men and the obstacles (educational, social, literary) that they (as always) present for women. So this chapter has two parts. In its first, we look at previous views on the text (usually of men who took the author as a man). In the second, we turn to the work itself in a quest for features unusual in a male writer.

The scene is set by Plummer's classic edition of Bede. He stated that the only surviving copy of the life is St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 567 (of the earlier ninth century), the text being made known by Paul Ewald in 1886, when he published extracts from it. Plummer followed Ewald in seeing it as 'the work of a monk of Whitby' and considered that there was 'strong evidence' for Bede's using it to write his own history.[1] As regards comment, Levison in 1946 cited Ewald (and Cardinal Gasquet in his 1904 edition of the life) on one curious point. Whereas Bede says that the English youths met by Gregory (in a famous encounter) were at Rome to be sold as slaves, the Whitby writer does not.[2] The anonymous author does not explain what the lads were doing there. Bede, a harsher observer, does.

Colgrave's essay of 1963 contains extended discussion (summarized in this paragraph and the next). The work, composed between 704 and 714 by a member of the Whitby community, provided liturgical readings for the feast of St Gregory. It has this structure. After a short preface come two chapters on Gregory's origins and his career as a papal envoy. In chapters 3 to 7 (despite a complaint on lack of sources for them) the writer describes certain miracles. Chapters 9 to 13 are about Gregory and the English mission, with the tale of the English youths in Rome. Chapters 14 and 15 provide material on King Edwin's baptism, and on the fate of a crow which newly-baptized courtiers regarded as croaking doom to their cause. In chapter 16 we hear of

Edwin's exile in East Anglia; in 17-19, the death of Paulinus and the bringing of Edwin's relics to Whitby. With chapters 20-23 we return to Gregory, including another four of his miracles; then come 24-28, on his writings. Finally, chapters 30-33 have a further apology for the paucity of material and the muddle in setting it out, before we end with Gregory's death and the praise of God.

Colgrave remarked how all this is utterly unlike the conventional saint's life, including those from Northumbria. He concluded that the author knew no models to go on, and that the deficiency of sources on Gregory led to padding-out with irrelevant passages on Edwin. Yet the writer did know the Bible well, as also some works of Gregory. Colgrave took this as perhaps due to the smallness of Whitby's library. (He did not reflect that the library might have been extensive, but the hagiographer untrained to use it.) Lacking written sources, the author followed oral tradition for many anecdotes. As for style, Colgrave was blunt. The life is 'a crude, shapeless, ill-written piece of work' by a writer 'ignorant of any type of contemporary literature, theological, hagiographical, or secular, except those already mentioned'. Its Latinity is 'of only a poor order. It makes a very bad showing' beside that of Bede. The author 'seldom or never stoops to pluck some flower of oratory' (and hence could have had no training in rhetoric; a significant point). 'His sentence construction is involved, his word order is confusing, his vocabulary is limited and often awkward, while grammatical mistakes are common', so that even a critical editor has little hope of clarifying 'the crabbed, awkward, ungrammatical, and sometimes infuriatingly ambiguous Latin of the original'.[3]

Hunter Blair, describing the Whitby author as a man, listed puns in the text: 'angels' for 'Angles', 'Alleluia' for King 'Aelle', 'de ira' for *Deire*, implicit *sta in loco* for 'locust', and 'Alleluia' for 'Aelle' (again), while the three syllables of *Eadwine* exemplify the Trinity.[4] In 1968, Colgrave published the standard edition, showing total assurance in the text's male authorship.[5] Despite hundreds of hours spent with the text, he noticed nothing to upset his assumption. Colgrave and Mynors hence called the author 'an anonymous monk'.[6] Hunter Blair in 1970 likewise described the author as 'a monk of Whitby' who wrote a work 'which is among the oldest surviving pieces of literature written by an Englishman in an English monastery.' He noted how its author used the second edition of *Liber Pontificalis* and most of Gregory's works, all presumably in Whitby's library. He added that, although no Whitby book is known to survive, archaeologists have found other evidence for learning there: runic and Latin inscriptions on stone;

elaborate metal tags meant to fasten delicate fabrics; pens to write on wax; metal fragments from the bindings of liturgical books. From these scraps we may guess at daily life in a Northumbrian monastery which (if not then derelict) was destroyed by Danes in the ninth century. It was a grand place, a royal mausoleum, site of a famous synod, and possessing a rich spiritual and intellectual life, even if it was 'more a place of education than of profound scholarship' (an implicit comment on the Latin life).[7] We shall come back to those archaeological remains. Stenton made the weighty comment that, where the Whitby life differs from Bede, 'its statements generally seem preferable'.[8] Charles Thomas, remarking on its curious story of *brandea* (= strips of silk or other cloth that had touched a saint's bones) which men, perhaps from Gaul, took back from Rome in sealed boxes (and turned back dissatisfied when they found out what was inside), calls the author 'an unnamed monk'.[9]

It was then, in 1972, that through the night of patriarchy there flashed a spark to light up half of the human race (= women). Mayr-Harting observed how easy it is to pick holes in the life, as when its author names Gregory's immediate predecessor as Benedict I (who was succeeded by Pelagius II). Yet the unidentified author was in a good position to know genuine Roman traditions, for the 'abbess of Whitby in his (or her) time was Aelfflaed, a daughter of Eanflaed'. His parenthetical 'or her' was brief; but pregnant. He went on to say that Queen Eanflaed was a friend of St Wilfred, who had direct experience of Rome. This helps explain one fact concerning the author. 'He [Mayr-Harting now reverted to the masculine pronoun] knew that Gregory's mother was called Sylvia', the truth of which is confirmed by John the Deacon (d. 876?), who saw a portrait of her in Gregory's monastery on the Coelian Hill, Rome. The Whitby author mentioned something that Bede did not.[10]

Later comments repeat a pattern. Dorothy Whitelock spoke of 'an anonymous monk' whose work was used by Bede (she later retracted the second statement).[11] Hunter Blair remarked of Augustine of Hippo that he 'would have given poor marks, perhaps none at all, for the Latin in which a monk of Whitby wrote a life of Gregory the Great'.[12] Elsewhere he contented himself with the merest mention.[13] In a somewhat jaunty account of women in Bede's time (including Osthryth at Bardney, Elfled at Whitby, Ethelthryth at Ely, and Ebba at Coldingham), the life is cited for Edwin's reburial at Whitby, before a conclusion on double monasteries as an 'avenue of occupation for meddlesome women'.[14] Professor Sawyer made no reference to the text, but did note how at Whitby 'many signs of opulence have been

found: large quantities of imported pottery, exotic metal-work, and many coins, in marked contrast to the austerities of Jarrow.' Its church was the fitting burial-place of King Oswiu, his wife and daughter, and King Edwin.[15]

Patrick Sims-Williams thereafter edited an eleven-line text by a certain Burginda, apparently a nun of Bath Abbey in the decades about 700. It is of interest for present arguments on the Whitby life, proving that women in early Anglo-Saxon England received education (at least up to a point). Burginda's Latin is full of 'imperfections'; her thinking is 'not very clearly expressed'; literary merits of her brief literary venture 'are entirely due to her use of Vergil, Arator' (and the like).[16] Burginda's difficulties in the male world of learning may be recalled in the context of Whitby, as well as of Ecgburth and Leofgyth, female correspondents of St Boniface (d. 755). There is another point. Even when women put pen to vellum, what they wrote could easily be lost. The letters of Ecgburth and Leofgyth survive thanks to associations with Boniface; the text by Burginda still exists because it is in a codex with a commentary on the Song of Songs. The life of Gregory is in a unique text discovered only in the 1880s. Implication: even when women wrote, the odds were against recopying of their work. That in mind, we read Professor Whitelock's useful extracts from the life, by 'a monk at Whitby', wherewith she corrected her earlier view on Bede's knowledge of the text.[17]

In the early 1980s, Patrick Wormald offered mixed views. He commented that the Latin of the text 'is unimpressive, and it contains some bizarre stories, but it does at least show good knowledge of Gregory's own works'.[18] Studies at Whitby were also the subject of an essay (if with no reference to the anonymous life).[19] Wallace-Hadrill remarked on the Deiran author's hostility to Bernicia, and how Bede's ignorance of the text is no surprise, given his patchy knowledge of Whitby.[20] While not mentioning the Latin life, Patrizia Lendinara does allude to writing by Burginda and other women, if rather optimistically, for she thinks that 'women seem to have had the same opportunities as men' for education in Anglo-Saxon England.[21] A further point. If Whitby nuns had a shaky hold on grammar and syntax, it was not for economic reasons. Oddments excavated at Whitby in the 1920s allow us to guess at its splendours, ending abruptly with the Viking attack of 867.[22] There was money to spend on books and teachers. If there were problems for the education of its nuns, it was perhaps for other reasons.

Stephanie Hollis thereafter made perfunctory allusion to the life as 'possibly written by a Whitby nun'.[23] (Here is a lost opportunity.) Nick Higham discussed

how an 'anonymous Whitby monk' spoke of St Gregory in heaven as a 'faithful and sagacious slave' in God's household, whose equivalent in this life would 'dole out wheat, probably as food but conceivably as seed corn'.[24] The allusions to food, one of several in the life, may have other implications. John Blair, supplying references to the cult of Gregory in early England, dates this account of him not to the early eighth century but the 'late seventh', making it 'the first significant work of English hagiography'.[25] Rambridge provides further analysis, but in a footnote dismisses the idea of female authorship (on which her audience questioned her at a 1999 Leeds medieval conference), declaring that 'I consider it an irrelevance in relation to the present interrogation of the text' (again, a lost opportunity).[26] Arresting new approaches are indicated by Kathy Lavezzo. She stresses the way that, thanks to Allan Frantzen and others since the 1980s, 'we have come to appreciate how the story of Gregory and his "boys" interestingly comments on a variety of issues in medieval culture, ranging from religious conversion, to wordplay, slavery, and sodomy.'[27] She says much on the anecdote. Nothing on female authorship, though. Yet, if the story of the boys was told by a nun, one might see it differently. James Fraser observes that, while Bede makes out Gregory as the Apostle of the English, the Whitby hagiographer regards him specifically as apostle of the Deirans.[28] Rosalind Love then described the text as 'by an unknown author (or, just possibly, authoress, since it was a double house, headed for a time by Abbess Hild)'.[29] (For a third time, a lost opportunity.)

In 2012 appeared the original version of this study, with the comment on how critics had drawn attention to the Whitby writer's Latinity, Deiran patriotism, fervent devotion to Gregory, and the like. But they all neglected the question of female authorship, despite allusions by Mayr-Harting in 1973, Hollis in 1992, Ramage in 2001, and Love in 2010.[30] Now for discussion since 2012, before we go on to features of the life that indicate a woman's point of view.

The paper of 2012 appeared too late to be taken up by Thomas Charles-Edwards, who yet noted how the life's fiercely pro-Deiran and anti-Bernician representation of the past has been ousted by Bede's emphasis on Northumbrian unity.[31] The paper was, however, acknowledged by Colin Ireland, who thought it potentially 'an important topic', even if of indirect interest to his account of supposed Irish influences on the author.[32] Another writer comments on the life and 'construction of identity' (but nothing on gender and authorship).[33] Professor Rosalind Love also remained unaware of it. Despite mention of 'a scattering of women's writing' in Anglo-Latin

(mainly by abbesses in Germany and beyond who were correspondents of St Boniface), and then a quite separate reference to 'the eccentric Whitby life of St Gregory', she said nothing on the latter as the work of a woman (and possible reasons for that 'eccentricity' in a male-dominated society).[34] Nothing of that either with Thomas Pickles, who lists the text merely as evidence for 'pre-conversion beliefs and practices' in England.[35] There is consideration of female saints in Insular texts. But, again, nothing about a female writer who has much on saints.[36] Professor Barrow comments on 'the divergence visible' between Bede's account of Edwin's conversion and that in the Whitby life.[37] Silence on monk versus nun as author, though.

Fortunately, the whole question of a writer and gender is now taken up by Diane Watt, who finds 'convincing' the case for female authorship, with the interesting rider that the Whitby life was perhaps 'written not by a single nun, but by several'.[38] Readers may now turn to her book as showing the way ahead. In the same year was published a striking remark on St Hilda as apparently 'airbrushed' from Whitby's historical memory, because the author of this Latin life 'does not refer to her' (reasons are suggested).[39] No word on that author's gender, however. Dr Rory Naismith writes at some length on 'an idiosyncratic saint's life written by an anonymous monk of Whitby' in about 700, before a parenthesis on the author as 'possibly she'.[40] On why that might be, however, his readers are (alas) left in the dark.

So, the more reason to search the text for a woman writer's point of view. We start with chapter 1, where (as Mayr-Harting noted) the author names not only Gregory's father, Gordianus, but also his mother, Sylvia, stressing their noble rank and the greater nobility of their son's Christian faith. The circumstance is slightly abnormal. Why, one wonders, should the author wish to name Gregory's father and mother, when Bede names his father only? Various explanations are possible; but the simplest and most coherent is that the author was a woman, and so naturally paid more attention to a noble Roman matron than Bede did.

In chapter 9 the author refers to the English youths in Rome, *forma et crinibus candidati albis*, handsome in appearance and fair-haired, when Bede described them as having 'fair complexions, handsome faces, and lovely hair'. Nothing remarkable here. But what is curious is a further comment with no equivalent in Bede: 'Some say they were beautiful boys, some that they were curled and elegant youths.' There is a spurt of personal interest, on whether they were children or adolescents, which the author desired to communicate. Again, diverse explanations are possible for this

coy and almost novelettish touch, which reads so strangely in a saint's life. Nevertheless, a woman might have more interest in the age of the lads than a man would. The harsh truth that they were slaves for sale is (as Levison observed) ignored by the anonymous writer; but not Bede, a sterner figure.

Women certainly appear in chapter 18, which calls Whitby 'the most famous monastery (*coenobium famosissimum*) of Aelflaed, daughter of the above-mentioned Queen Eanflaed, the daughter, as we said above, of Edwin, now a very religious woman (*femina valde iam religiosa*)'. An enthusiastic, gushy, and slightly breathless sentence leaves no doubt on the author's pride in the royal ladies who ran the show. A monk might, of course, feel such pride; but a nun could feel more.

Stronger evidence comes in accounts of four miracles, three of which involve woman. Chapter 20 tells of a woman who smiled (*subrisit*) when about to receive communion from Gregory, so that the saint instead put his hand over her mouth, and the wafer back on the altar. After mass ended, he asked her why she smiled. She said, *Ego ipsos panes meis feci manibus, et tu de illis dixisti quia corpus Domini essent*, 'I made that bread with my own hands, and you said that it was the body of the Lord.' Yet, when he showed her the same consecrated host, now seeping blood, she believed. The congregation prayed for her, she took communion, and all ended well. Not only is the story about a woman, skilled in kneading dough, but it gives us her actual words. A singular touch. One notes too how the anecdote ends well for the woman, who (despite her error) is treated gently. She in this contrasts with some men referred to in the text, including a priest who is given a whipping (chapter 19), a pope who dies from a kick in the head (chapter 28), and messengers from Gaul who are threatened with summary execution. There is violence towards men, but not towards women. One might speculate on how our presumed Whitby nun felt about men. She may have resented bitterly a world ruled by them, and subconsciously expressed her revenge on them.

Chapter 29 concerns Trajan and a widow (in a tale, we hear, 'told by the Romans'). Gregory learns how, when Gregory led his army off on campaign, a widow brought everyone to a halt, appealing to him with the words, *Domine Traiane, hic sunt homines qui filium meum ceciderunt, nolentes mihi rationem reddere*, 'Lord Trajan, there are men here who murdered my son, and give me no redress.' Trajan promises justice on his return, but she replies, *Domine, si inde non venies, nemo me adiuvet*, 'But, Lord, if you do not come back, no one will help me.' Trajan thereupon takes money from

his bronze armour and compensates her for her loss. Gregory weeps that so good a man should be lost and prays for him; it is eventually revealed that his tears were waters of baptism, so that the Emperor is now in Paradise. Once more, we have a story which gives the very words of a woman, in this case one who has been wronged but who gains justice in a most flattering and gratifying way from the Emperor himself.

Focus on the point is sharpened by another narrative. It concerns relics in sealed boxes, picked open by Frankish pilgrims on their way back from Rome, who were unhappy with what they found (not bones of saints, but mere rags that had touched those bones) and went back to complain. They tell an archdeacon that, if presented with such relics, their king was more likely to have them executed than to reward them (*plus se morte damnatos quam ulla gratia exceptos*). The archdeacon retorts testily that they have been stupid (*quod stulte satis egissent*), but he will see what he can do. While we have the actual words of women in other miracle stories, who are privileged with direct speech, both the mutton-headed Frankish messengers and the Vatican official are relegated to reported speech. The author did not think it worth giving their actual words. One notes also how the Franks fear that their king would have them killed. It is one more aspect of cruelty to men. The story ends with the archdeacon's bringing the messengers to Gregory, who with God's grace performs a miracle. Doubt is silenced. After that is the tale of yet another Roman woman, whose husband divorced her. Denounced by Gregory, he hires magicians to try and bewitch the Pope's horse, but without success.

The anonymous Whitby life thus displays evidence to suggest that a woman chose and shaped its narrative. Women are treated with respect, never contempt, whether a Roman mother, a sceptical communicant, a scorned wife, or a distressed widow; we have their actual words; men suffer atrocious violence or the threat of it, but women never do; there is at one point a concern for children. One may add that three passages concern the preparation or provision of food. There are tales of a Roman woman who baked bread, and a Lombard king whose health benefited from a milk diet, while Gregory in glory is compared to the manorial steward who apportions flour or corn amongst workers. The author had some interest in food (although the point should not be laboured). It contrasts with a complete lack of interest in typical male activities. We hear of a crow put down as vermin, but never the hunting of game; of a general leading his army, but not of fighting. There is nothing on the preparation and copying of manuscripts. Nor is there material on the liturgy to indicate that the author

was a priest and said mass; but there are stories in which a priest is flogged and a pope kicked to death. Nothing suggests that the life is the work of a man; whereas several curious details indicate a woman's perceptions of existence.

Two last points. First, implications of this chapter. If the unknown author was a female religious, it casts light on women's education (or lack of it) in the eighth century. The anonymous life of Gregory will thus move front-stage for debate on gender and literacy in early England. Whitby saw the beginnings of English Christian poetry with Caedmon, in the days of Abbess Hild (d. 680). A generation later (it seems), Whitby saw the beginnings of English women's writing. That Yorkshire town has a double place in England's earliest literature. Caedmon has never lacked fame, with a monument to him near the abbey ruins, at the top of a hill. Perhaps in a few decades we shall see a monument as well to the anonymous sister of Whitby?

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CHAPTER TWO

BEDE AND AN IRISH MONASTERY AT BOSHAM, SUSSEX

One of the mysteries of early Britain has been *Glasimpere*, a monastery of expatriate Irishmen mentioned in the Glossary of Cormac (d. 908), bishop-king of Cashel (near Tipperary). *Glasimpere* was long identified as Glastonbury, Somerset, its monks having supposed early contacts with Ireland. But not so. *Glasimpere* will have been in Sussex, at Bosham, with an Irish community known from book four of Bede's *History*. If so, the results are various. First, *Glasimpere* was not Glastonbury and tells us nothing about it. Second (more positively), Bosham's seventh-century monastery was evidently remembered in tenth-century Ireland. It perhaps had a higher profile than Bede admits. Third, the passage by Cormac yet shows strange distortions of history, as does its allusion to an Irish stronghold in Cornwall (see chapter ten of this book). Fourth, *Glasimpere*'s name has further implications. Bosham is two miles from Fishbourne, site of a famous Roman palace. Its imperial associations apparently explain *Glasimpere*, 'emperor's stream'. This entry in *Sanas Cormaic* or 'Cormac's Glossary', Ireland's national *mélange historique*, thus has varied surprises for Anglo-Saxon England.

First, then, *Glasimpere* and the historians. In the last century they often equated it with Glastonbury, as untroubled by difference of form as Fluellen (in Act Four of *Henry V*) was by those between 'Macedon' and 'Monmouth'. Sir John Rhŷs used the connection to support his (now discredited) theories on the Irish as original inhabitants of Britain. Citing Whitley Stokes's 1868 edition of *Sanas Cormaic*, he believed that 'the town of Glastonbury and an unidentified fort of the Cornish Brythons' showed Britain as anciently settled by the Irish, their power extending to 'the Ictian Sea' or English Channel.[1] That Cornish stronghold can also be identified. It was (see chapter ten) the cliff-fort of Trevelgue, near Newquay, on Cornwall's Atlantic coast. Cormac was thereafter quoted on '*Glasimpere* of the Gadhaels' (supposedly Glastonbury) together with reference to James Ussher's *Britannicarum*

Ecclesiarum Antiquitates (1639) for a 'vague tradition' of St Brigid at Glastonbury (possessing a house allegedly 'affiliated to Kildare'). They were taken to prove Ireland's glory, as was Cormac's *Dún Trédúi* (the best form; often corrupted), a Cornish fort where the Irish 'held sway' down to the English Channel.[2]

Others joined the chorus. *Glasimbere na nGáedel* 'of the Irish' appears as Glastonbury in one gazetteer, with Cormac's comment on it as *for brú mara nIcht*.[3] But *for brú mara nIcht* means 'on the English Channel' (called *Muir nIocht* in Irish to this day, after *I[e]ctis*, the ancient name of St Michael's Mount, Cornwall). That Glastonbury is thirty miles from the English Channel was an inconvenient fact which did not prevent *Glasimpere*'s again being related to 'a house at Glastonbury affiliated to Kildare' as implied by legends of St Brigid.[4]

The passage was then edited in detail by Thurneysen (his study permanently neglected, for it appeared a month after World War I broke out). He cited Stokes and Heinrich Zimmer on how, because Glastonbury is not on the English Channel, *for brú mara nIcht* was perhaps a corrupt reference to the River Brue, Somerset.[5] Thurneysen was a great scholar. But his conjecture (or guess) is not compelling and in any case had little influence. In the English-speaking world, other accounts remained easier to find. William Watson gave the passage as follows:

'When great was the power of the Gael in Alba [Britain], they divided Alba between them into districts and each knew the residence of his friend, and not less did the Gael dwell on the east side of the sea than in Scotia [Ireland], and their habitations and royal forts were built there. Whence is named Dinn Tradui, i.e., the triple-fossed fort of Crimthann the Great, king of Ireland and of Alba to the Sea of Icht [the English Channel], and hence also is *Glasimpere* or Glastonbury of the Gael'

-- where Watson remarked on Criomhthann, legendary ruler (his apocryphal reign dated 366-78 CE), that he might have lived in Cornwall, but nothing shows 'that he was ever in Scotland'.[6] It is a warning on Cormac's inflated talk. Kenney also set out the passage, its last part rendered 'hence is Glastonbury of the Gael, a monastery on the Brue'; after that is 'And there also, in the lands of the Cornish Britons, stands Dind map Lethan, i.e., the fort of the sons of Liathán', which Kenney related to a passage (from the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*) on the Irish in Wales.[7] As for the Brue, Glastonbury is indeed on this stream. But Irish *brú* is a different word. It

means 'edge, brink, bank' and denotes the Channel coast, not flowing water in Somerset.

After nebulous geography, nebulous biography. Crimthann son of Fidach, whom Cormac makes out as ruler of Britain and Ireland, figures in *Aided Crimthainn* or 'The Death of Crimthann' (a text perhaps of the eleventh century). The tale is Irish melodrama, with fighting and female sorcery and poisoned chalices and hostages buried alive. A medieval redactor's comment shows that even he disbelieved parts of it.[8] No surprise, then, if one scholar took Crimthann or (modern spelling) Criomhthann as a 'supernatural personage', like his sister (who, supernatural or not, poisoned both her brother and herself). Yet the fortress in Cornwall is real enough, fitting 'the historical fact of Irish conquests in south-west Britain'.[9] Cormac mingled truth and fiction.

Kenneth Jackson gave a crisp account of those conquests. He thought that the 'well-known passage in the Old Irish glossary of Cormac' on *Dind Tradui* bore 'good internal evidence of going back to a genuine tradition', even if Crimthann himself was surely 'legendary'.[10] Jackson was silent on *Glasimpere*. So was Nora Chadwick, despite allusion to Cormac's Irish fortress 'on the north coast of the Dumnonian peninsula'.[11] She then quoted Cormac on Irish ascendancy in Britain 'even after Patrick's arrival'; but with nothing on toponyms.[12] Briefer is her mention of Cormac and how 'the Irish had formerly had kingdoms in Britain no less than their Irish kingdoms, and were ruling both simultaneously': a situation transformed by Cormac's day, when the Norse were on the sea and making 'powerful settlements' in each island.[13] At this point, a digression on Trevelgue. This promontory fort, two miles north-east of Newquay, is 'defended by a complex of seven lines of banks and ditches' and a great 'natural cleft'; it lies above 'an excellent natural harbour with a flat beach'.[14] The attractions for Irish colonists are obvious.

By now, *Glasimpere* was heard less of. Charles Thomas, who called the Glossary a 'kind of haphazard encyclopaedia', proposed that *Dinn Tradui* was 'one and the same' as Cormac's *dún maic Liathain* or 'fortress of the sons of Liathan', an Irish people who in the fifth century settled in south-west Wales. Thomas added that 'it would be a help to be able to identify' that Cornish fort or forts.[15] A different pattern is hence emerging. Out of *Dinn Tradui* and *dún maic Liathain,* the first also figuring (as Jackson observed) in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* and a twelfth-century Welsh-Latin life of St Carannog, Bishop Cormac conjured up an Irish

empire in Britain, with *Glasimpere* bolstering up his claims. That leads us to Professor Byrne of Dublin. He gave the relevant passage as follows:

> *Inde dicitur* Dinn Tradui, i.e., Dún Tredue, i.e., the three-fossed fort of Crimthann Már mac Fidaig, king of Ireland and Alba and down to the Ictian Sea, *et inde* Glasimpere na nGáedel (Glastonbury of the Irish), a church on the border of the Ictian Sea. In that part is Dind map Lethain in the lands of the Cornish Britons, i.e., Dún maic Létháin...

-- with the translation based on one by Whitley Stokes.[16] Elsewhere we learn that the 'the land of the Cornish Britons' is 'in the same part of the country as Glastonbury'.[17] A surprising statement, Cornwall's border with Devon being seventy-five miles from Glastonbury.

Citing Charles Thomas, Ken Dark observes that evidence for Irish settlement in south-west Britain 'is much weaker than is often assumed'.[18] It hardly compares with Gaelic Scotland. On Cormac's boast (as represented in Kuno Meyer's edition of 1912) that 'there were as many Irish living across the sea to the east as there were in Ireland itself', proper names are taken to show that Cormac was 'referring mainly to the southern settlements', where the 'fort of the sons of Liathán' in Cornwall would belong to the Uí Liatháin, their territory east of Cork and west of the Déisi, a people with colonies in south-west Wales. Nothing here on *Glasimpere* or Glastonbury, however.[19] Charles-Edwards was also silent on them, if citing Meyer for the Uí Liatháin in Cornwall.[20] Yet *Glasimpere* = Glastonbury does figure in a book on Arthur, with citation of a 1967 paper on St Patrick by H. P. R. Finberg in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*. Finberg took Cormac as evidence for 'the influence of Glastonbury' about the year 900.[21] He failed to see that 'Glastonbury' here was a mere guess.

In 2015 came progress on the twenty-eight cities of Britain listed in *Historia Brittonum*. Most are not Roman at all, but a hotchpotch of monastic and other sites in Wales and beyond. They include the fort of Trevelgue, demonstrating its fame in the years before 1000.[22] A magnificent bibliography of early Ireland then appeared with an entry for *Sanas Cormaic*, lucidly setting out its manuscripts and editions.[23] It was followed by a study of Trevelgue, with acceptance of the proposal (first made in 1994 by Charles Thomas) that it was Cormac's *Dún Trédúi*.[24] Thomas will have been right when (in 1971) he considered *Dún Trédúi* and the 'fort of the sons of Liathán' as identical. Cormac's remarks on Britain are muddled (when not actual fantasies). He might well make two strongholds out of one.

If, then, *Dún Trédúi* is Trevelgue, Cornwall, where was *Glasimpere na nGáedel*, a church on the border of the Ictian Sea? The answer is simple. Yet nobody has noticed it, including this writer, who would not have written this paper but for an enquiry from Dane Pestano, an independent historian in Sussex.

The solution was in plain sight for centuries, thanks to Bede. In book four of his *History* (chapter thirteen) he describes St Wilfrid's conversion in the 680s of the South Saxons, still pagan despite an Irish monastery at Bosham. Hence an editorial reference 'Scottish mission already there' (with 'Scottish' meaning 'Irish').[25] Expert commentary on it came from Plummer. Except for the settlement of Máeldub at Malmesbury, Wiltshire, it was 'a solitary Irish missionary effort in the South of England' but 'does not appear to have had much success'. Its abbot, Díchuill, is otherwise unknown.[26] While the name is uncommon, the geographical writings of a ninth-century Díchuill or Dicuil (an Irishman at the court of Charlemagne) were famous in medieval times.[27]

The Sussex monastery was noted by Ian Nairn in a lyrical account of Bosham, now a yachting resort. Its parish church is allegedly 'on the site of a Roman basilica'; bases of a Roman arch are visible below the chancel arch, itself dated to the earlier eleventh century.[28] Irish monks presumably occupied the Roman basilica. Little or nothing has been said on this, however.

That *Glasimpere* was Bosham is most easily shown by a map, whereon Bosham and Malmesbury are each marked by a blue cross pattée.[29] It shows them as the sole Irish monasteries in southern England, even if their monks had compatriots ruled by Fursa at the Roman fort of Burgh Castle (near Yarmouth, Norfolk), or by Bishop Aidan at Lindisfarne (off the Northumberland coast).[30] Burgh Castle was later deserted, Bosham was not. Despite that, ecclesiastical archaeologists say nothing on any Irish remains.[31] Bede's allusion to Bosham and Sussex paganism is retold elsewhere.[32] As noted, by the 670s every English kingdom had the seat of a bishop except for Sussex, 'where a heathen folk was incuriously watching a little community of Irish monks at Bosham'.[33]

Bosham, with an excellent harbour, was easily reached by Roman roads. (Ordnance Survey maps make that clear.) As for Bede's actual words, he called the South Saxons almost entirely 'ignorant of the divine name and faith. There was, however, a certain monk of the nation of the Scots, called

Dicul, who had a very small monastery in the place which is called Bosham, surrounded by woods and sea, and in it five or six brothers, serving the Lord in a humble and poor way of living. But none of the people of the province cared either to imitate their life or to listen to their preaching.'[34] Bede's disobliging remarks on Díchuill's community are yet questioned. By 1066 the place was a centre of power, even figuring in the Bayeux Tapestry. It perhaps had an earlier status which 'Bede's dismissive tone' does not imply.[35] The case for that is strengthened if the memory of those monks was cherished in Ireland as late as 900 CE.

After Bosham, Glastonbury. Our interest is negative. One need merely indicate sources for its obscure pre-English history. Mid-Somerset being conquered by West Saxons in the 650s, a charter of 680 suggests that they 'allowed the monastery which they found there to continue'; while St David's name is conspicuous in a charter of the next century.[36] The place is recorded with the Brittonic name 'Ynys Witrin' and is 'frequently mentioned in connection with David and Gildas' by late hagiographers.[37] That David was claimed in an eighth-century charter as Glastonbury's main patron (after the Blessed Virgin) suggests that he had 'something to do' with the community in the sixth.[38] It would be authentic tradition, despite the difficulties of the sources, evident from one extended account.[39] It is in sharp contrast to the legends of Joseph of Arimathea and King Arthur which have made Glastonbury 'the most famous of Britain's monasteries'.[40] One may recall that, when St Dunstan was born nearby in about 909, 'a considerable library remained from earlier times' at Glastonbury, surely with 'many traditions of the past'.[41] It strengthens the case for David's influence. His patrons may have included local British princes, their names found in a tenth-century genealogy.[42]

Archaeologists then came front-stage. Their excavation reports, with implications of a fifth-century 'Celtic monastery at Glastonbury', began figuring regularly in the literature.[43] The community had 'at least four oratories of the wattled type'.[44] These remains were yet termed 'regrettably uninformative'.[45] One problem was the lack of imported pottery to be expected at ecclesiastical sites.[46] By now *Glasimpere* was never mentioned, even in commentary on Irish pilgrims who travelled 'to kiss the relics of their patron', St Patrick, as also the necklace and bell of St Bridget, a (supposed) visitor of 488 CE.[47] Elsewhere is allusion to 'an (?) early sixth-century monastic foundation'.[48] As for the Irish, there are helpful comments on St Indract (d. 854), abbot of Iona, and St Bridget, both venerated at Glastonbury, the latter being named in liturgical calendars of the tenth

century.[49] Nevertheless, one writer refers to 'refreshingly sceptical treatment' of the whole Irish question by Finberg and others.[50]

In more recent discussion there is advance and regress. Names of pre-English abbots can be shown as genuinely Celtic.[51] Glastonbury appears too in an updated account of early British Christianity.[52] But the archaeology seems not to get one very far. Digs at Glastonbury did not supply 'the startling results that many had hoped for', with an excavator at its nearby Tor being told that his exertions were done in the wrong place at the wrong time by 'the wrong person'.[53] Preferable is analysis of toponyms in the early texts, as with the local historian Harry Jelley (who in the 1990s located St Patrick's birthplace of *Bannaventa* at Banwell, North Somerset, not far from Glastonbury). It brings out where early saints (Patrick, Kea, Gildas, David) studied and preached in the Wales or Somerset or Cornwall of the post-Roman period.

In all these recent accounts of Glastonbury, a link with *Glasimpere* has vanished, and rightly so. We have two different names, two different places. What, then, is the significance of *Glasimpere*? The toponym is unusual. The second element is Irish *impire* 'emperor'. It appears in early texts as *impere* or *impire*, invariable in the singular; a plural *impere* occurs in a homily on St Andrew, told that the Roman emperors (*na himpere Rómanachu*) have ordered the persecution of his faith.[54] But the sense of *-impere* is more probably 'of an emperor' rather than 'of emperors'. As for the first element, it is Irish *glas* or *glaise* 'stream, rivulet', as with Glassan 'little stream' near Athlone, or Glasnevin 'Naeidhe's stream' in north-west Dublin, with its cemetery and botanic gardens.[55] So the meaning *Glasimpere* is 'emperor's stream'. Why we have so strange a form is made clear by archaeology and the Roman Palace of Fishbourne.

In the early 1960s, the excavation of a site at Fishbourne, just over a mile from Bosham, caused a media sensation. Remains were found of a military store and elaborate bath-house (with mosaics) of between 44 and 55 CE. These were included within a palace begun about the year 75. It was some 500 feet square, with four wings around a courtyard. 'The sea, probably in the form of an artificial inlet, reached right up to it.' Of the building's hundred or so rooms, almost all had mosaic floors; much painted wall-plaster was also recovered. After a serious fire, everything was demolished in the late third century.[56] The dig, which 'revolutionized' ideas on domestic life in Roman Britain, revealed how an army base 'beside an inlet from the sea' was in the year 75 or so replaced by a palace as big as 'a small Oxford

or Cambridge college'. Besides 'amazing' mosaics were, it seems, gardens leading down to the sea, together with an ornamental lake. Its obvious occupant was Togidubnus, pro-Roman king of the Regnenses.[57] It would be a visible sign of the massive 'golden handshake' given to Togidubnus by the Romans as a reward for political realism.[58] The 'quite outstanding luxury' in which he lived may be guessed at from fragments of Corinthian column-capitals.[59] Despite the razzmatazz of press and television publicity, the association of the site with Togidubnus is maintained in a careful study.[60] Marbles from Turkey and Greece, with a range of what Sir Barry Cunliffe called 'most exotic veneers', would be his. Significant in this context is interpretation of a fragmentary inscription (*RIB* 91) from Chichester to Togidubnus as 'Great King (*rex magnus*) in Britain'.[61] That goes with remarks, in a study of the Solent in the fifth century CE, on the ostentation of his court as proof of British maritime contacts with the Eastern Mediterranean.[62]

How does all this relate to *Glasimpere* 'emperor's stream'? Bosham is on a harbour, Fishbourne is on a former tidal inlet. Cogidubnus had official status as 'great king in Britain'. It is hard to escape the conclusion that *Glasimpere* denoted Old Fishbourne, a place that the Irish would certainly know, and where (it seems) they conveyed the status of its resident by the word 'emperor'. Bosham being a mile and a half from Fishbourne, it appears that they reapplied the name of the old royal site to that of the eighth-century monastery. For a prince-bishop at Cashel in south-west Ireland, the distance between the two was immaterial. If so, we have unexpected evidence on how a celebrated Roman mansion left a trace in early medieval Ireland. It must have been thought the wonder of its age, and two islands spoke of it.

So we have four conclusions:

1. The *Glasimpere* mentioned by the Irish bishop-king Cormac (d. 908), long identified as Glastonbury, has nothing to do with the place.
2. It instead denoted the seventh-century Irish community at Bosham. A Sussex monastery known to Bede was still remembered in tenth-century Ireland. It had more impact than thought.
3. Cormac's Glossary thus provides genuine evidence on Sussex monks, as also on the cliff-fortress of Trevelgue, near Newquay, Cornwall. Both helped to bolster a myth of Irish rule in fourth-century Britain.

4. The form *Glasimpere* is also of interest. It means 'emperor's stream' and seems to be a transferred use (for Bosham) of Fishbourne's Irish name. If the sumptuous first-century palace of Old Fishbourne was forgotten in Britain, traditions of it yet survived in Ireland. It implies a double achievement. Just as the house of Irish monks at Bosham 'by the English Channel' was familiar to Bishop Cormac, so, too, the name which he gave to it points to the unexpected fame of Fishbourne's Roman palace.

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