THE INTRODUCTION
OF CHRISTIANITY INTO THE
EARLY MEDIEVAL INSULAR WORLD

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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VOLUME 19

THE INTRODUCTION
OF CHRISTIANITY INTO THE
EARLY MEDIEVAL INSULAR WORLD

Converting the Isles I

Edited by

Roy Flechner and
Máire Ní Mhaonaigh

with the assistance of Eric Cambridge

BREPOLS

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Part III

Perceptions of Conversion

PLEBS: CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY AMONG LATE ANTIQUE BRITONS

Alex Woolf

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the uses of a single Latin word, *plebs*, in the Late Antique West, and particularly in territories occupied or influenced by the Britons, in the fifth and sixth centuries. As a Latin common noun this word originally meant ‘multitude’ but came to be regarded as a collective noun describing the common people, the masses, in contradistinction to *populus* which denoted the whole population including the elites.¹ The evidence for the use of this word in British Latin comes from three main sources: firstly its adaptation to become the Welsh word *plwyf*, the normal word for an ecclesiastical parish; secondly as *plou*, the most common place-name generic in the Breton-speaking parts of Brittany; and finally in a handful of texts derived from Britain and Ireland in what may be described as the long sixth century.

In this latter usage it is attested as early as the document commonly known in modern parlance as ‘The First Synod of St Patrick’ or the ‘Synod of the Bishops’ and identified in the rubric of its sole manuscript copy as *Synodus episcoporum id est Patrici Auxili Issernini*. The text survives in a ninth-century manuscript (CCCC, MS 279, pp. 1–10) probably written at or near Tours.² That this text, or something very like it, was in existence by the end of the sev-

¹ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *plebs*.

² *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. by Bieler, p. 15. The manuscript can be viewed online through the Parker Library’s website: <http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/page_turner.do?ms_no=279>. The text is edited and translated by Bieler in *The Irish Penitentials*, pp. 54–59.

Alex Woolf is Senior Lecturer in Dark Age Studies at the University of St Andrews.

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enth century can be inferred from the fact that fourteen of its canons, twelve explicitly attributed to Patrick, are cited in the *Collectio Hibernensis* of the early eighth century.³ Patrician studies are at best controversial, and unanimity of opinion rarely seems to emerge; the date and authenticity of this text are no exception. While Bury and Bieler were happy to accept a genuine Patrician origin for most of these canons, admitting the possibility that a proportion were interpolations, Binchy initially preferred a seventh-century date, seeing traces of the Easter controversy in the reference to the tonsure *more Romano* in canon 6.⁴ Kathleen Hughes, however, pointed out that the distinction between wearing one's hair *more Romano* and *more barbarorum* predated the specific issues related to the Easter controversy and emphasized the apparently largely pagan society within which the Church was operating at the time the canons were drawn up. On the basis of these considerations, she seemed willing to push the date of the synod back into the mid- or early sixth century, though not as early as the time of Patrick himself.⁵ As David Dumville has pointed out, however, many of the objections to a genuine Patrician or fifth-century origin for the text are based on presumptions made about that context on the basis of the later pseudo-historical and hagiographical material.⁶ Given the lack of certainty as to Patrick's absolute dates, and whether his mission to Ireland preceded or succeeded that of Palladius in 431, or indeed whether he was among the first missionaries to Ireland as a whole rather than simply to the west coast, it is hard to be certain what we should expect the conditions of his time to be and how rudimentary we should expect the Church organization to be.⁷ Certainly his own works do not allow us to assume that he was the only bishop working in Ireland in his own time and if, as most scholars seem inclined to believe, his mission post-dated that of Palladius then we also have to bear in mind that Palladius was sent to the Christians already living in Ireland.⁸ If the date of 493

³ Binchy, 'St Patrick's First Synod', p. 57.

⁴ Bury, *The Life of St Patrick and his Place in History*, pp. 234–45; *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. by Bieler, p. 15; Binchy, 'Patrick and his Biographers, Ancient and Modern', pp. 45–49.

⁵ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, pp. 44–53.

⁶ Dumville, 'St Patrick at his "First Synod"?: For a fuller discussion of the dating of this text, see Flechner, 'An Insular Tradition of Ecclesiastical Law', pp. 27–32.

⁷ For a recent defence of the pre-Palladian Patrick, see Koch, 'The Early Chronology for St Patrick'.

⁸ For Palladius's mission, see Charles-Edwards, 'Palladius, Prosper and Leo the Great'. See further the contributions by Thomas Charles-Edwards and Colmán Etchingham in this volume.

for Patrick's death is taken as the more credible of the options, as Dumville would appear to argue, then the latter part of the Bishop's career was probably nearer to Hughes's preferred date for the canons preserved under his name than it was to the arrival of Christianity in Ireland.⁹ One might consider an alternative argument against the authenticity of the ascription of the canons to Patrick in their subject matter; a number of the canons seem to address precisely those issues of discipline which modern scholars have inferred, from the text of the *Confessio*, that Patrick himself felt he was being accused of having transgressed. The most thorough analysis of the text to date is that of Aidan Breen, who argued that there was no internal evidence to narrow the date down between the second quarter of the fifth century and the first quarter of the seventh.¹⁰

Within this text the word *plebs* appears in canons 1, 3, 24, 27, and 33. In canons 30 and 34 the word *parruchia* appears. Hughes regarded the use of these terms within the text to be synonymous, or at least to have represented coterminous units of ecclesiastical and civil jurisdiction.¹¹ It is not entirely clear, however, that this inference is beyond question. The two instances of *parruchia* both clearly describe ecclesiastical jurisdictions. In canon 30 we are told that a bishop who leaves his *parruchia* and goes to another 'nec ordinare praesumat nisi permissionem acciperit ab eo qui in suo principatus est' ('must not presume to ordain unless he has received permission from him who holds the *principatus* there'). Clearly in this context *parruchia* has the meaning of 'diocese'. The holder of *principatus* in this case must mean the diocesan bishop in the territory the bishop has entered after leaving his own. In the text's own terminology we might say that a bishop's *parruchia* was the territory or community in which he held *principatus*. This meaning of the term is supported by the use of *parruchia* in the *Collectio Hibernensis*.¹² It is not entirely clear, however, that this interpretation is supported by the second use of the term in canon 34 of our text. Here we are told that 'Diaconus nobiscum similiter qui inconsultu suo abbate sine litteris in aliam parruchiam adsentiat, nec cibum ministrare decet et a suo presbitero quem contempsit per penitentiam uindicetur' ('If one of our deacons goes away to another *parruchia* without consulting his *abbas*, or without a letter, he should not even be given food; and he should be punished with

⁹ Dumville, 'The Death-date of St Patrick'.

¹⁰ Breen, 'The Date, Provenance and Authorship of the Pseudo-Patrician Canonical Materials', pp. 91–96.

¹¹ Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, p. 50.

¹² Etchingham, *COL*, pp. 106–09.

penance by the priest whom he has disobeyed'). The *abbas* here is also described as a priest (*presbiter*), and since his delinquent junior is a deacon rather than a monk we should probably assume that the term *abbas* in this case refers to the senior cleric of a specific church, regardless of the status of that church. In this case we should probably wonder if the *parruchia* here envisaged is not simply the jurisdiction of the *abbas* rather than an episcopal diocese. It is worth noting perhaps, for comparative purposes, that Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, in Syria, writing in 449, claimed to have eight hundred churches in his care 'for so many *paroikiai* does Cyrrhus contain', demonstrating that the term could be used in something close to its modern English sense in the fifth century.¹³ Thus it may be safest here to translate the Latin *parruchia*, in the context of the 'First Synod' at least, simply as 'ecclesiastical jurisdiction': for the bishop, a diocese; for the *abbas*, simply the local area or community for which his church held sacramentary rights and responsibilities.¹⁴

Hughes's contention that *plebs* and *parruchia* were used coterminously might be supported by canon 24, which rules 'si quis advena ingressus fuerit plebem non ante baptizat neque offerat nec consecrate nec aecclesiam aedificet nec permissionem accipiat ab episcopo, nam qui gentibus sperat permissionem alienus sit' ('If a newcomer joins a *plebs*, he shall not baptize, or offer the holy sacrifice, or consecrate, or build a church, until he receives permission from the bishop. One who looks to laymen for permission shall be a stranger'); yet this is far from certain. Since, in theory at least, all of Christendom was under the jurisdiction of one bishop or another, the *plebs* might have been a constituent part of a diocese. Interpretation of this point largely depends upon the use of later texts and prevailing scholarly models.¹⁵ Etchingham argues, in my view persuasively, that *plebs* tends to have the force of 'lay community' and that, as in the case of *parruchia*, we might well be wise not to imagine that it defines a specific type or scale of community but to consider its use in each case to be situationally constrained.¹⁶ Thus for the bishop the *plebs* might comprise the laity of his diocese, while for the *abbas* merely those layfolk who were served by his church.

¹³ Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, p. 134, citing Theodoret's 113th epistle.

¹⁴ Etchingham, *COI*, p. 125, reaches similar conclusions.

¹⁵ Etchingham, *COI*, p. 136, who also notes Sharpe's suggestion that it was the cleric rather than the *plebs* which pertained to the bishop in this sentence: Sharpe, 'Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', p. 243.

¹⁶ Etchingham, *COI*, pp. 130–41.

In the context of the present paper it is not necessary to trace the full development of the semantics of these terms in early Irish history. The choice of the 'First Synod' as a starting point in this examination suggested itself because, as we have seen, it is one of the earliest surviving texts from the insular world, which has implications for the semantic range of the word *plebs* in the context of British Latin usage. Whether of fifth- or sixth-century date, the text clearly originated in a context in which external influence from the church in Britain was both expected and accepted, and it is likely that what we are seeing is to some extent a mapping of British Latin usage onto Irish social contexts. As noted at the outset, the Welsh and Breton words for 'parish' also derive from Latin *plebs*, and although few texts survive from British-speaking contexts as early as their Irish counterparts, the usage in Ireland almost certainly derived from such contexts. That this reflects a very early, Late Antique, usage is also suggested by the parallel semantic development of Italian *pieve*, also from *plebs*, which denoted the district served from a baptismal church and, by extension, the church itself. Such baptismal churches were generally staffed by an archpriest (perhaps the equivalent of the *abbas* of canon 34 of the 'First Synod', discussed above) and several deacons, sometimes with the addition of one or more priests. The archpriest would appoint chaplains for small local chapels, but the population of the district would attend the *pieve* for baptism and major festivals.¹⁷

From the same period as the 'First Synod' we have only a handful of British Latin texts. Two of these, the so-called 'Synod of the Grove of Victory' and the 'Synod of North Britain', do not contain the word *plebs*.¹⁸ Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*, dating from some point between the late fifth and mid-sixth centuries, contains the word seven times.¹⁹ In the first instance, at chapter 21.6, the term is clearly used to distinguish the laity from the clergy: 'ipse grex domini eiusque pastores, qui exemplo esse omni plebi debuerint, ebrietate quam plurimi quasi vino madidi torpebant' ('the flock of the Lord and his shepherds, who should have been an example to the whole *plebs*, lay about, most of them, in drunken stupor, as though sodden in wine').²⁰ The next use of the word is also interesting in the present context. In chapter 53.3 Gildas quotes Amos 7. 15,

¹⁷ Thompson, *Cities of God*, p. 34.

¹⁸ *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. by Bieler, pp. 66–69.

¹⁹ The analysis that follows is based upon the edition and translation of Winterbottom (Gildas, *DEB*).

²⁰ Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 21.6, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 96 (text), p. 25 (translation).

‘and the Lord took me when I followed the flock, and the Lord said to me; Go, prophesy to my people Israel’,²¹ but whereas the Vulgate uses the words *populum meum* for ‘my people’, Gildas renders the phrase *plebem meam*.²² This precise usage does appear in two other Late Antique quotations of the text, but *populum* seems far more common, and even in those two examples the surrounding wording does not match Gildas’s usage suggesting, once again, that the choice of vocabulary is his.²³ Once again, however, he is using *plebs* to distinguish the laity from the ministry. The same distinction is made at the beginning of the ‘complaint to the clergy’, at chapter 66.1, where the pastors are said ‘quippe non commoda plebe providentes, sed proprii plenitudinem ventris quaerentes’ (‘not to look for the good of their *plebs*, but to the filling of their own bellies’),²⁴ and again at chapter 66.2, where he claims that they ‘plebem ob peccata non corripientes’ (‘do not reprimand the *plebs* for their sins’).²⁵ At chapter 70.2 he compares the sacrifice made by Jephthah in order to win victory for the people of Gilead over the Ammonites with the unwillingness of the clergy to make sacrifices in his own day,²⁶ but whereas the Vulgate uses *populus* to describe the Gileadites,²⁷ Gildas here uses *plebs* once again. His penultimate usage is a verbatim citation from the Vulgate text of Psalm 21. 7 at chapter 74.6.²⁸ Finally, at chapter 86.1, in a citation from Micah 3. 3, he once again replaces *populus* with *plebs*.²⁹ What we see throughout *De Excidio*, then, is a deliberate use of the term *plebs* by Gildas to denote the laity as distinct from the ministry.

The final triangulation point in our survey is the Breton material. Here we may begin by citing John Koch from his *Atlas for Celtic Studies*:

Latin *plebs*, Old Breton *plou* — very common in early place-names in Brittany — is cognate with Welsh *plwyf* ‘parish’; it is thus likely that there were parish churches

²¹ This is the Douai Rheims translation of the Vulgate text.

²² Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 53.3, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 113 (text), p. 46 (translation).

²³ The first example of *plebem meam* is from book 1 of Lucifer of Cagliari’s *De non Parcendo in Deum Delinquentibus, ad Constantium Imperatorem* dated to AD 360, ed. by Migne, col. 951A. The other example is from the *Weingartner Prophetenbuch*, ed. by Dold, at p. 39.

²⁴ Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 66.1, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 118 (text), p. 52 (translation).

²⁵ Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 66.2, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 118 (text), p. 52 (translation).

²⁶ Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 70.2, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 121 (text), p. 56 (translation).

²⁷ Judges 11. 11.

²⁸ Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 74.6, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 124 (text), p. 59 (translation).

²⁹ Gildas, *DEB*, chap. 86.1, ed. and trans. by Winterbottom, p. 129 (text), p. 65 (translation).

located in communities with *plebs/Plou* names. However the parish does not seem to have been the primary function or defining criterion of communities called *Plou* in early medieval Brittany.³⁰

The range of the *Plou* place-names and the limits of their zone in eastern Brittany correspond closely to that of Breton [language] place-names in general, a boundary which again holds true for the pre-1200 attestations as well as the observable Breton toponymy on a modern map. It appears, therefore, that the *plebs* was a distinctive form of organization in early Breton-speaking society.³¹

Koch's map of *Plou* place-names attested in pre-1200 sources shows 129 examples with gaps on the map largely corresponding to gaps in the charter evidence.³² The toponymic formation in *Plou-* was already well established by the ninth century when many such places appear in the cartulary of Redon.³³ The question of the origin and nature of these settlements, or rather territorial communities, has been examined at length by Wendy Davies.³⁴ Since the British settlement in Armorica dates to the same period as the British mission to Ireland, that is to say, to the fifth and sixth centuries, we may imagine that the context of the British-Latin usage of the word *plebs* in the two countries shared some common points of reference.³⁵ Davies has emphasized the territorial and apparently secular nature of the Breton *plebs* and its vernacular equivalent, in contradistinction to the Welsh and Cornish ecclesiastical senses.³⁶ On the basis of the Redon material she has argued that by the ninth century the *plebs*

was the primary unit of social organisation. Hence, men were seen as belonging to this or that *plebs* and as members of *plebs* (*plebenses*) they had some sort of corporate existence, to which individuals were obliged to account; transactions, therefore, were announced to the men of the *plebs* [and] local offices were performed with reference to the unit of the *plebs*.³⁷

³⁰ Koch, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies*, p. 163.

³¹ Koch, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies*, p. 170.

³² Koch, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies*, Map §24.

³³ *Cartulaire de l'abbaye Saint-Sauveur de Redon*, ed. by Guillotel, *passim*.

³⁴ Davies, 'Priests and Rural Communities in East Brittany in the Ninth Century'.

³⁵ For the most recent and useful discussion of the British colonization of Armorica, see Brett, 'Soldiers, Saints and States?'

³⁶ Davies, 'Priests and Rural Communities in East Brittany in the Ninth Century', p. 178.

³⁷ Davies, 'Priests and Rural Communities in East Brittany in the Ninth Century', pp. 180–81.

Davies goes on to observe that, while settlement within the *plebs* might be dispersed, the church was focal to the unit as a whole and often shared its name with the *plebs*.³⁸ The priests of these churches, like those in the 'First Synod', were clearly family men, often married and living and working as part of the community.

Koch's contention, quoted above, that the parish 'does not seem to have been the primary function' of the Breton *plebs*, would seem to be based on Oliver Padel's passing comment, in his examination of Cornish *plu* ('parish'), that by the fifteenth century the normal Breton word for 'parish' was not *plou* but a borrowing from French.³⁹ Clearly the impact of French on Breton was much accelerated from the twelfth century onwards, and the adoption of the French term by the end of the Middle Ages may well reflect an increasingly francophone ecclesiastical hierarchy and bureaucracy as well as the development of provisions for pastoral care, through the course of the Middle Ages, from collegiate mother churches staffed by one or more married priests and a team of deacons to more local churches staffed by a single celibate priest.⁴⁰ The peculiarity of the Breton situation would appear to be the centrality of the ecclesiastical term and, perhaps, institution in structuring secular communities. This peculiarity almost certainly tells us something about the earliest phase of the emergence of distinctly British communities in Armorica and may point to a role played by confessional identity in constraining the absorption of British immigrants into wider Armorican society. The absence of clear evidence for episcopal structures in the *ciuitas* capitals of the Coriosolites and Osisimi, at Corseul and Carhaix respectively, has long been noted. Brett's assertion that it is 'doubtful whether they had ever been the seats of bishops in the Roman period'⁴¹ has little to recommend it since by the fifth century it would have been remarkable if any city in the empire was without episcopal provision.⁴² These two civic jurisdictions seem to have been the earliest part of Armorica to fall under British control, since the expansion into the Vannetais in the late sixth century and into Lower Brittany (including the dioceses of Rennes and Nantes) in the ninth are well recorded.⁴³ That at least some of the activities and

³⁸ Davies, 'Priests and Rural Communities in East Brittany in the Ninth Century', pp. 181–83.

³⁹ Padel, 'Cornish *Plu*, "Parish"', p. 76.

⁴⁰ For this transformation, see Galliou and Jones, *The Bretons*, pp. 253–79.

⁴¹ Brett, 'Soldiers, Saints and States?', p. 20.

⁴² Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*, pp. 137–68.

⁴³ Waroch's expansion into the region of Vannes is recounted by Gregory of Tours, *Libri*

practices of the British clergy in sixth-century Armorica were regarded as irregular by the Gallic hierarchy is well attested in the conciliar *acta* of the time.⁴⁴

In this light I would suggest that the centrality of the *plebs* among the Britons of Armorica arose initially due to confessional separation from the native Gallic population. This hypothesis need not support the model advocated by Nora Chadwick that 'the saints were the leaders and the official pioneers of the immigration',⁴⁵ which has been extensively critiqued by Brett.⁴⁶ Rather, the comparison might be made with other barbarian groups of the fifth and sixth centuries who settled within the Empire yet retained their own clergy and liturgies. The best known such examples are the separatist churches of the Goths and Vandals. Scholarly discourse regarding these churches has tended to be led by the abundant material surviving from the pens of those who strove for unity within the Church, and we have tended to view these clergy and liturgies as explicitly Arian and heretical.⁴⁷ But, as Fergus Millar reminds us, 'the hostile appellations given by outsiders to endless Christian sub-groups alleged to be guilty of false beliefs haunt the pages of contemporary Christian writers, just as they do the pronouncements of the Emperor'.⁴⁸ There is precious little internal evidence that Gothic Christianity was doctrinally so very different from Catholic beliefs, and to some extent the struggle within the Late Antique Church was organizational and concerned with spiritual authority. As late as 428 Nestorius, whose views on Christology were not so different from those of Arius, was appointed Bishop of Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius II. He was deposed in 431 and eventually condemned to exile by the Emperor in 435 but continued to protest his orthodoxy until his death in 450. The Emperor and his court had initially attempted to reconcile Nestorius with his opponents since his goal was simply unity within the Church, and there is every reason to believe that Nestorius's ultimate condemnation was a pragmatic decision rather than one based on deep religious commitment.⁴⁹ The issue was, perhaps,

historiarum X, v, 26. A commentary can be found in Smith, *Province and Empire*, pp. 17–19. Breton expansion in the Carolingian period is covered in detail throughout Smith's book.

⁴⁴ Brett, 'Soldiers, Saints and States?', p. 22.

⁴⁵ Chadwick, *Early Brittany*, p. 208.

⁴⁶ Brett, 'Soldiers, Saints and States?', pp. 18–34.

⁴⁷ For a recent review and examination of the situation, see Hen, *Roman Barbarians*. These issues are touched on throughout this volume but particularly at pp. 53–57.

⁴⁸ Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, pp. 130–90.

essentially one in which the army, in some regions consisting largely of Goths or Vandals, may have maintained its own ritual cohesiveness with its inherited liturgy, in some cases certainly in their peculiar vernacular. This resulted in the civil, Roman, population attending different churches with different clergy from those attended by the barbarian soldiery and their families.⁵⁰ 'Heresy', or at least heterodoxy, may have been the product of such separatism rather than its cause, or indeed it may simply have been a powerful pretext for those who demanded unitary worship and ritual. Indeed one example of a distinct ethnic arrangement that was not classified as heretical can be found in the East with the defection from Iran of the Arab chieftain Aspebetos and his followers. Aspebetos converted to Christianity, taking the name Peter, and eventually turned up at the Council of Ephesus in 431 as bishop of the *parembolai* of Palestine; that is to say, bishop of the encampments of his nomadic tribesmen pitched in and amongst sedentary *poleis*.⁵¹ Catholicism, rather than orthodoxy, may have been the underlying principle of those who condemned the 'ethnic' Churches. Seen in this light the *plebs* may have become the social focus for the Britons in Armorica initially due to liturgical separation from their Gallic neighbours, but in the three centuries which separated the settlement from the burgeoning of source material in the Carolingian period, explicitly British congregations may have expanded and absorbed both the lands and, to some extent, the personnel of their Gallic hosts.

In conclusion we have seen from the evidence of *De Excidio* that Gildas, writing on the island of Britain at some point between the late fifth and mid-sixth centuries, clearly used the term *plebs* to distinguish the mass of the people from their spiritual leaders. The 'First Synod' shows us the same distinction being made in the contemporary mission field in Ireland where we also see *plebes* being served by a mother church ruled by an *abbas* who was a *presbiter* attended by a group of deacons. This same model was present in Brittany by at least the early ninth century. *Plebs* was borrowed into insular British vernacular as the word for an ecclesiastical parish, a sense which survives in Welsh and Cornish, whereas in Continental Britain it became the term for the broader civil community which attended a mother church, largely, it has been argued, because attendance at a particular church would have been one of the main features which distinguished Britons and Gallo-Romans during the early gen-

⁵⁰ It is tempting to speculate whether a similar social dichotomization might have enabled and encouraged the survival of Germanic paganism in lowland Britain in the same period.

⁵¹ Fisher, *Between Empires*, pp. 39–49.

erations of the settlement. Taken together all three categories of evidence shed light on the organization of the British Church during the darkest period of its history without the need to resort to hagiographical pseudo-histories.

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