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1922.

**639th ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING,**  
HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B,  
THE CENTRAL HALL, WESTMINSTER, S.W., on Monday,  
February 20th, 1922, at 4.30 p.m.

LIEUT.-COLONEL G. MACKINLAY IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed and signed and the HON. SECRETARY announced the following elections :—A. G. Wilkinson, Esq., as a Member, and Captain Ralph Carr-Gregg as an Associate.

The Chairman then introduced Mr. W. Dale, F.G.S., F.S.A., who read his paper on "Christianity in Roman Britain," illustrated by lantern slides of great interest.

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**CHRISTIANITY IN ROMAN BRITAIN.**

BY WILLIAM DALE, Esq., F.G.S., F.S.A.

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The subject of the introduction of Christianity into our land during its occupation by the Romans is one of the deepest interest. The evidence available is, unfortunately, of the most meagre description, so that there have not been wanting those, including no less an authority than Thomas Wright, who have denied altogether that Christianity was known in Roman Britain, and was not introduced until the coming of Augustine. Our knowledge in this direction has, however, of late years been reinforced, and it is satisfactory to find that one of the greatest and best authorities on early Christian Art, Mr. O. M. Dalton, F.S.A., has, in a recently published guide book of the British Museum, placed the matter beyond controversy.

I purpose to lay before you a few of the actual facts we possess, and to mention some of the traditions and legends which have come down to us, upon which many have built their faith. One might also adduce as an argument the reasonableness of the supposition that with the Roman invasion the Gospel came. The roads which still stretch across our Country, made by the army, were the first thing to occupy the attention of the invaders. By the side of one there was found in the last century in Hampshire an ingot of lead from the mines in the Mendip Hills bearing on it the stamp of the Emperor Nero, with his titles so fully set out that Roman students can date it with certainty at A.D. 60. At that time the great Apostle of the Gentiles was living in the Capital in daily contact with soldiers of the army, and penned the

message to Phillip: "The saints that are in Rome salute thee, chiefly they of Cæsar's household." The slides I purpose showing you presently are a set I have had prepared to illustrate Roman life in Britain, and I make no apology for introducing them, as they will help you to understand something of the civilization and refinement which obtained in our Country when the Empire was nominally Christian and persecution had ceased.

The traditions and legends which we find in the writings of the Monkish chroniclers are comparatively well known. William of Malmesbury gives an account of the founding of the first Christian Church in Britain at Glastonbury. This was written ten centuries after the supposed founding. He derived the story from a charter of St. Patrick, which has been pronounced a forgery, and from writings of a British historian which he found in the libraries of St. Edmund and St. Augustine. Archbishop Usher who perused these writings pronounced them to be the work of a Saxon monk. The account reads that after our Lord's Ascension the word of God spread rapidly. Persecution was stirred up by Jewish priests, and the disciples dispersed, preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. Amongst them Philip the Evangelist, arriving in the territory of the Franks, converted many of them. Here he chose out twelve of his disciples and set over them Joseph of Arimathea, and sent them to Britain in the year 63. They were given a certain Island where they were admonished by the Angel Gabriel to build a church in honour of the Blessed Virgin, which was finished in 64. The story is further embellished by the medieval detail that Joseph of Arimathea bore with him the Holy Grail and deposited it in the church. That the story owes its origin to the time when the religious house at Glastonbury was rising in importance and the monks were anxious to spread its fame, there can be very little doubt. On a recent visit to Glastonbury, however, I was not a little surprised to find that the distinguished architect in charge of the ruins was a believer in Joseph of Arimathea.

To a later date belongs the martyrdom of St. Alban, the first British martyr. I have always thought that there must be a foundation of truth in this story, for such a famous Abbey and so far renowned a shrine could hardly have grown up round an invention. Moreover, the time was the beginning of the 4th century, and the Diocletean persecution, under which he is said to have suffered, was the expiring effort of Roman paganism. The story is given by Bede, who obtained it from Gildas. Fleeing from Wales to avoid the attacks which the Roman Government was directing against his religion, came a Christian preacher named "Amphibalus," the name is suspicious, and suggested by the cloak he wore. Albanus, a native solider, came under his teaching, gave him shelter, and himself embraced Christianity.

When the persecutors came on the track of Amphibalus they found him not, but Albanus, with whom he had exchanged garments, was in his place. He was haled before the judges, who told him if he refused to worship the gods he should suffer the same punishment as Amphibalus. He was taken to a neighbouring hill, where his head was struck off—miracles were performed on the way, and the eyes of the executioner fell out on the ground. Prof. Haverfield characterizes the whole story as a forgery by William of St. Albans in the 12th century. It is much to be regretted that a systematic exploration of the site of Verulamium, such as was done at Silchester, cannot be undertaken. Such a large and important City probably contains evidences of early Christianity.

Another well-known story is that of King Lucius, to which the date of about A.D. 180 is assigned. In this connection it is needful to call attention to an article by Prof. Flinders Petrie in the "Proceedings of the British Academy, for 1917-1918, on 'Some neglected points in British History.'" This distinguished scholar deals far more leniently than other writers with the accounts of Roman Christianity. He tells us that the fullest account we have of early British history is given us in the Chronicle of Tysilio, a writer in the West of England who has been entirely ignored, and no use made of his record. Internal evidence, Prof. Petrie says, shows it is based on British documents extending back to the 1st century. Geoffrey of Monmouth drew much from him, but dressed it up largely and impaired our reliance upon it. If it is to be regarded as a medieval composition it must have been drawn from some classic source. Passing over the accounts given by Tysilio of the landing of Cæsar, and the later Roman expeditions, the chronicle mentions two generations of British Kings before Caradog, and three after him. One of these, Bran, was hostage in Rome for seven years for his son Caradog, who it is implied was sent back to rule in Britain. The sojourn of Bran in Rome was from 51 to 58, while Paul was in Rome, and when he returned he brought the faith of Christ to the Cambrians. The next account is that about A.D. 180, King Lucius, his descendant, sent to Pope Eleutherius at Rome for missionaries from Rome. This mission is named under Eleutherius in the *Liber Pontificalis*, and Bede gives us the same information. In contradistinction to Prof. Petrie I sum up the evidence in the words of the greatest authority on Roman Britain, the late Prof. Haverfield. Writing in the "English Historical Review" for 1896 he says:—

"Early British Christianity is recognised as a subject of wide importance. In the 7th century its facts and fictions had power to affect religious beliefs. A rhetorical passage in Tertullian mentions it about A.D. 200, but forbids precise conclusions.

‘The Britons, in parts inaccessible to the Romans, Christ has truly subdued.’ We conjecture from the silence of ancient writers that Christianity reached Britain by natural expansion, rather than conscious missionary effort. We conjecture further that this expansion was from the Roman provinces of Gaul and Germany. Communication between these places was easy and frequent. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries the armies of Britain and the Rhine exchanged recruits. In the 4th century, Ammianus tells us British cornships were accustomed to sail up the Rhine. How Christianity came to Gaul we do not know, perhaps from the East to Marseilles. Arguing from these premises we may suppose that at any rate as early as the 3rd century individual Christians on individual errands came from Gaul, Germany, and perhaps from Rome, that gradually congregations were formed, and, in time, even bishoprics established.

“No less than six Apostles are supposed to have preached in Britain. These are not the patriotic inventions of Englishmen, but due largely to Continental writers of the 6th and four following centuries. They are guesses, unsupported by any evidence. In the 7th century a more astonishing story appears. Lucius, King of Britain, sent to Pope Eleutherius, about A.D. 174-189, and requested conversion. Whether the request was granted is not stated. The story is certainly untrue. It is rejected by historians of all creeds and schools. It appears first in the biographical lives of Popes known as the ‘*Liber Pontificalis*,’ and originated in Rome, and in such a way that it was not inserted before A.D. 700. From thence it was copied inaccurately into the ‘*Historia Brittonum*,’ ascribed to Nennius, and more accurately into Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*. Its origin is attributed to the 7th century, when a violent controversy raged between British and Roman bishops, and historical arguments were forged.”

In the 4th century of our era we pass into the region of solid facts, and are able to consider tangible evidence given to us by the labours of the archæological explorer. Before leaving behind us the realm of pious fictions, however, we stay a moment to mention one picturesque legend which has greatly struck the fancy of men. I refer to the story of Helena. The author of the story appears to have been Geoffrey of Monmouth, to whom I have already referred. It is perpetuated in the arms of the Borough of Colchester, which date back to the 12th century. Geoffrey mentions no less than three Kings of the name of Cole, the third of the name being King or Chieftain of Colchester, who had killed a Roman usurper that had succeeded Allectus. Hearing of this, the Roman power sent Constantius Chlorus to assume the Government, with whom King Cole or Coel made peace. On his death a few months after, Constantius was crowned, and

married Helena, the daughter of Coel, and had by her a son named Constantine, born at Colchester. Dismissing King Cole from the reckoning, we have Constantius as a real person, who died at York in 300. Helena also had a real existence, and her son, Constantine the Great, was associated by Roman writers with Britain. But the story which has made Helena famous we cannot suppose was other than a medieval invention. She was honoured as a popular saint on May 3rd, the discovery of the Cross, and on September 14th, the exaltation of the Cross. It is told of her that she went to Jerusalem at the request of Constantine to search for relics. She found almost everything worth finding; the true Cross, the three holy nails and other relics. She afterwards went further East and found the remains of the Magi or the three Holy Kings, which enshrined in the Cathedral of Cologne made the fortune of that City. In honour of them Cologne took the three crowns for its City arms. Colchester did the same, each crown surmounts one of the three holy nails. The Cross as found by Helena was of living wood and sprouted when placed in the temple. Helena, by instructions from an angel, divided the Cross into four portions and sent them to different parts of the world. In dismissing these legends we may extract profit from them in the words of a Colchester antiquary, Mr. Gurney Benham—

“ Never mind about the literal truth of these legends. Is the allegorical meaning of them true? I do not think you can find a legend with a truer and more beautiful meaning than that of the aged Helena after long journeying and many toils and perils, finding at last the true Cross, the living Cross, the life-giving Cross, the Cross which the angel told her to distribute to the four quarters of the world. No wonder this story captured the imagination of Christendom. So, too, with the legend of the three Holy Kings. These three crowns symbolized what they stood for—the three acceptable gifts, viz., generosity and charity—gold; worship, thankfulness and contrition—frankincense, virtue and sweetness of life—myrrh. The three crowns of life. And the three nails meant the triple anguish of the Great Sacrifice—the agony of mind and soul and body, to save the minds and souls and bodies of all mankind. It is a little sermon, this coat-of-arms. A little sermon, but I have read longer ones which teach less.”

At Roman sites scattered all over Britain, Christian emblems, and, in rare cases, monumental inscriptions have been found. Amongst the earliest symbols of the Saviour is the fish, probably introduced from Alexandria. Its Greek name gave rise to an acrostic which was known as early as the 2nd century. The five component letters standing for the five words reading: “ Jesus Christ, Son of God Saviour.” The well-known “ Chi Rho ” monogram, made up of the two first letters of the Greek word for

Christ, appears to have been introduced as a Christian symbol by Constantine about A.D. 312. The earliest dated example is 323. This monogram has been found at Silchester or Calleva Atrebatum, and at various "villas" elsewhere, as well as on pieces of silver in the famous hoard, a portion of a robber's loot, recently found at Traprain Law. It probably reached this Country by way of Gaul. The most interesting example is certainly that found in exploring the villa at Appleshaw in Hampshire. Buried at one spot on this site was found the whole of the pewter plates and dishes of the family, skilfully made and decorated with niello. On one small plate or saucer was scratched the Chi Rho monogram. It is difficult to suppose this vessel was of secular use, and I prefer the suggestion by a patriarch of the Greek Church made to me when lecturing at the British Museum: that it was the forerunner of the medieval paten, the plate on which the bread was placed at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It calls up to us a vision of simple piety of the 4th century, when the well-to-do owner of this villa—perhaps joined by others of like feeling from the many villas around—met together on the first day of the week to do what Pliny describes the early Christians doing, viz., "To sing, by turns, a hymn to Christ as God, and to bind themselves by a sacred oath to commit no iniquity." The word he uses, "sacramentum," has come down to us in the sacrament. It meant in Rome the oath of allegiance which the soldier took to his captain. The Christians acknowledged Christ as the Captain of his salvation and swore obedience to Him.

The question of buildings set apart for Christian worship naturally arises next. It is certain that until the time of Constantine when the Empire became nominally Christian, there were no churches, and it was not until the edict of Milan in A.D. 312 that basilicas were allowed to be built. The statement that in 314, three bishops, whose names are given, were sent from York, London and Lincoln to the Council at Arles, I am unable to regard as authentic. Bede refers to churches built at Canterbury. St. Martin's in that City has, however, been examined by experts, who have given it as their opinion that though much Roman material is used in the building, none of it is *in situ*, and they prefer to regard it as dating from the 7th or 8th century. But in the year 1892, during the course of the excavations at Silchester, the foundations of a building were laid bare, which bore such a striking resemblance to the 4th century churches discovered in Africa, Italy and Syria, that all doubt was put at rest, and on the most convincing evidence a Christian Church of the Roman period in Britain was exposed to our gaze. A model is placed in the Reading Museum, and as I was in touch with the excavations all along I am able to show you photographs



taken at the time. The building lay to the South-East of the forum, and was situated in the same insula. It consisted of a central nave with apse at the West end, two side aisles with transverse walls at each end, and a portico or narthex. The nave, porch and apse had a paving of red tesserae. In a line with the chord of the apse and extending into the nave was a square pavement of more ornamental character, composed of black and white tesserae with a border of lozenge pattern, alternately red and grey on a white ground, enclosed with lines of black. In a line with the entrance is a rough pavement of flints, in the centre of which is another, about 4 feet square of red brick. Beside it is a pit or well about 4 feet deep. Here we have a church of the basilican type. The basilica was a Roman court of justice, but the word was applied in the time of Constantine to buildings consecrated to Christian worship. It is, of course, within the bounds of probability that the origin of the building may have been secular, and that in later times it was adapted as a church. It has been pointed out that the space occupied by the square of ornamental pavement was occupied by the Christian altar, or, as I myself prefer to call it, the Lord's Table. The pavement at this part is in good condition and not worn, as though it had been covered by a mat. The celebrant standing in the apse would look East, facing the congregation. The platform of red brick at the entrance probably marks the site of a lavatory. The portico would form the narthex, the name given by Christian writers to the vestibulum in front of a basilica, to which the catechumens and penitents were admitted.

The building was a small one, its extreme length being only just over 40 feet. The number of Christians in Silchester must, therefore, have been few and Paganism probably still in the ascendant, as the remains of two large and two small Pagan temples were discovered.

With this glimpse of Christianity our survey of the Roman occupation ceases. We should much like to know what befell our Country when the Roman legions were withdrawn, but of the next 200 years we have no authentic history. We would fain, however, believe that amidst a time of unrule and disorder, some of those who followed Christ kept the lamp of truth alight, and still retained their faith when the Teutonic tribes invaded Britain, who enshrined the names of their gods in the days of our week. At the coming of Augustine, we enter the domain of reliable history, and Christianity is once more established in our Island. We are bound to state, however, that there had arisen in the meantime great changes of observance and ritual. Monasticism had arisen, and the practices of the Church were far removed from the simple observance of such as gathered in the 4th century in the little basilica at Calleva Atrebatum.

## DISCUSSION.

Lieut-Colonel MACKINLAY said:—It is now my privilege to propose a hearty vote of thanks to Mr. Dale for his excellent paper. The printed part gives the evidences of the facts which have evidently been most carefully weighed. As the historical data which we possess for the period under consideration in Britain is but scanty, archæological research has rendered reliable aid.

Mr. Dale refers to the Roman leaden ingots found in England, and he states that their weight is determined by the strength of ordinary pack mules, and this is doubtless correct. At the present time the weights of the guns of mountain artillery, carried on mules' backs in order to traverse narrow paths impossible for wheeled transport, are governed in the same way by the strength of ordinary transport mules, the most powerful being selected for the transport of the guns themselves. Mr. Dale refers to the use of lead for coffins, the reason doubtless being that this is a metal which resists oxidation far better than iron. One of the noticeable features in Pompeii is that the leaden pipes belonging to the old houses retain almost entirely the forms which they bore when first constructed, so well does lead resist the action of the weather.

The lantern slides claim our admiration and attention, particularly the first, of the coin with the Chi rho monogram stamped on it.

The carefully drawn plans of Silchester well show the high state of organisation and comfort in a Roman city in Britain. It is interesting to be reminded of the fact that at some time of the year the position of the principal streets can be clearly seen in the growing crops by the colour differing from that around them.

I conclude by asking you to accord by acclamation a hearty vote of thanks for this most interesting paper.

Mr. THEODORE ROBERTS thought that the evidence for the martyrdom of St. Albans was a little suspicious and enquired whether the name was not in some way connected with Albion, the Roman name of Britain, which would point to his being a mythical person.

With reference to Sir Henry Howorth's most interesting remarks he thought that it was the good emperors who were persecutors, not the bad. Nero only burnt a few Christians to draw off attention from himself, but Prof. Ramsay had shown that Vespasian was really the first persecuting emperor, and he instanced Marcus Aurelius, the very best of the emperors, as a persecutor. He thought the reason was that these good administrators recognized that the principles of Christianity were entirely opposed to their system and would ultimately destroy it.

He quite believed there were other martyrs in Britain, even if there were no St. Alban, but not in the time of Diocletian, as it

was Constantius Chlorus who was then the Cæsar in Britain, and he was favourable to Christianity.

He thought the historian, J. R. Green, and others, had gone too far in seeking for the origins of our nation wholly in Germany, and believed that although it was true that the Anglo-Saxons conquered the British, they mingled with them much as the Normans afterwards mingled with the Saxons.

Dr. SCHOFIELD having to leave early made the following remarks on a paper which was read at the discussion:—There can be no doubt of the value and interest of this much too short paper. It is well established that there was in Great Britain an organised Christian church for some hundred years before the Anglian (Danish) invasion in 449. It must be remembered that Constantine the Great, son of Queen Helena, was crowned at York in 306. That the first Christian Council at Nice was held under him in 325, and also that Paganism had been suppressed and made illegal through the whole Roman Empire 27 years before the Romans finally left England in 418, when they left a flourishing English church, and no sign of British or Roman idolatry (*Encyclopædia Britt.*) then existed.

The Danish conquest swept all this away, and was a heathen triumph, and when 100 years later St. Augustine in 597, brought Christianity again into England, it was in no way founded on the ancient British-Roman church.

It must be remembered, too, that Christianity in England never came from British sources. Romans planted Christianity here twice over. Its earliest introduction is unknown; but there is in my mind little doubt that He who knew all from the beginning, referred to this country in the last words He spoke on earth, when he spoke of the "uttermost parts of the earth" (the well-known "Ultima Thule" of Rome—the then name for Great Britain).

Christianity may have been introduced as early as Apostolic days, but certainly flourished in the third and fourth centuries from its connection with Rome, only to be so thoroughly and almost completely destroyed by the English or Angles (Danes) in the fifth century.

All through our history, after the Apostolic age, Rome planted the truth here, and it never came from a British source—first of all during the rule of the Cæsars, and after under the Popes. In a peculiar sense Christianity in this country is the daughter of the Romish Church. long before the Roman Catholic Church that we know was founded. Only in 597, by Augustine's mission here, was this introduced and finally organised in 690, to be overthrown many hundred years later as the Established religion of this country at the Reformation.

Remarks from Prebendary Fox on Mr. Dale's paper has an interesting note in the prolegomena of 2 Timothy on Claudia. He goes

fully into the evidence of the possibility of her being a British Christian. He does not come to definite conclusion, but merely leaves it as a probability.

Mr. DALE said in reply that he had been most anxious to present to the audience only reliable information on the subject. For this reason he had not quoted the author of "St. Paul in Britain." At the same time he was well aware that there were many who went further than he had felt justified in doing.