7

CONCLUSIONS

In the last six chapters we have explored the historic and archaeological background to Christianity in Roman Britain. The approach taken was thematic, looking at the remains as they might have related to the main stages of the life of a typical Roman Christian. Many aspects of this life would have seemed familiar to a Christian from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. However, there were also many aspects of British Christianity which were unusual or distinct. The use of lead tanks for baptism or other ritual purposes was only found in Britain; nothing similar has been found in Gaul or elsewhere. Britain is also unusual in the number of precious metal hoards containing objects with Christian images. Similar hoards have certainly been found elsewhere in the Empire, but nowhere else is there such a concentration of discoveries. As well as these more obvious differences, there are more subtle variations. The use of peacocks on official belt buckle sets, for example, is unknown outside Britain. Despite the fact that these objects were manufactured to represent wider Imperial authority, they developed a distinctly British symbolic repertoire. Moving from these small personal artefacts to the largest aspect of Christian belief, church buildings, Britain's unusual nature persists. Unlike late Roman churches found in Gaul and elsewhere, many British churches appear to have been built from wood and do not show the same level of architectural elaboration. However, we need not to leap to any conclusions that the fourth-century church in Britain was somehow deviating from a wider imperial norm. By the beginning of the fifth century, Christendom covered a larger area than the Roman Empire, having expanded well into the Sassanian kingdom of Persia, into the Caucasus and south into Ethiopia. The religion that had been nourished by Constantine's fortuitous decision to convert had spilled beyond the territo-

rial control of the imperial throne. It would have been more surprising if these Christian communities had shown any major uniformity. The distinctness of the British church is just what might be expected.

Any discussion of Christianity in Roman Britain inevitably has to confront the question of how widely spread the Church was by the end of the fourth century, or, as the question is more usually couched, was it a 'success' or a 'failure'? The normal approach to answering this query is to roughly quantify the archaeological evidence from the province and then cast around elsewhere in the Empire for comparisons against which such conclusions can be made. Whilst a great deal of effort is spent on assessing the extent to which particular objects or sites exhibit 'Christian' traits, less time is spent on considering the social context in which religious belief is expressed. Inevitably spectacular objects or finds, such as the Water Newton treasure or the Lullingstone wall paintings will score highly on any attempt to measure Christianity. However, to what extent are these discoveries more significant for quantifying Christianity than, for example, a crudely carved *chi-rho* on the base of a pot? Does the apparent cost of an object or wealth of the person or persons who commissioned it reflect the religious fervour which motivated its use, or like the parable of the Widow's mite, do the simple graffiti show a greater, more heartfelt attempt to express belief than the expensive wall paintings which could have been the passing whim of a late Roman aristocrat?

The situation becomes even thornier when we try and explore the influence of a religion. Late Roman Britain was not a democracy; the social influence of a particular ideology was not a simple function of the number of its believers, but was instead intimately tied up with issues of power. A religion may have relatively few followers, but due to their social position its influence may have spread far. We have seen how Christian symbols appeared in a range of official contexts, from belt sets to seals and coinage. Even if an individual does not follow a religion they may acknowledge its special position if it is seen to be intimately connected with secular sources of power.

These questions show the difficulty in trying to quantify the success or failure of Roman Christianity. The archaeological evidence is not a direct reflection of some notional 'level' of belief, but the product of the way in which people expressed their belief, which in turn was inevitably influenced by comparative levels of wealth, amongst many other social factors. The complex nature of this evidence means that maps showing the geographical distribution of objects and sites of possible Christian nature can only go so far in exploring the nature of the religion in Britain. In the same way that some of the unusual elements of Christianity in Roman Britain are just part of the wider variation in religious practice in the Empire, we need to be alive to the internal variations within the archaeology of Christianity in Britain. It is important then to relate these variable expressions of belief to differences in the social fabric of the country. Some of these modes of religious belief may have

a geographical element and hence be indicated on maps, but others may be related to differences in status and class and thus not recognisable spatially. Despite the Church's constant vigilance against heresy, internal disagreement and sectarian tendencies, the congregations will have developed their own particular styles of worship and belief. It is by looking at these different styles of Christianity that we might get a better understanding of how the religion functioned in fourth-century Britain. Rather than creating an overarching model for the Church as a whole in the country, I want instead to see Christianity in Britain as being practised by a range of separate but related communities of belief, whose particular brands of worship may have followed differing trajectories as they moved into the fifth century.

Religion and towns

Across most of the Roman Empire, Christianity was initially an urban phenom-enon. Communities sprung up amidst the great trading cities of the Eastern Mediterranean and followed the trade routes north and west. The ecclesiastical administration of the Church was centred on the bishops, who were usually urban. Although in some areas, such as North Africa, some of the larger rural estates, such as the one owned by Melania the Younger, could have their own bishops, these large farming centres were almost proto-urban in nature them-selves. The textual evidence we have from Britain suggests that the same pattern was followed. The list of bishops from the Council of Arles suggests that a metropolitan bishop was based in each of the provincial capitals of the diocese. It is highly unlikely that these were the only bishops in Britain, particularly in the south and east, and there was presumably a network of subsidiary bishoprics, based on the existing administrative structure of *civitates*. However, although the towns of Roman Britain may have been the controlling nodes it is questionable how far Christianity in Britain was ever a truly urban phenomenon.

The first Roman towns were based on pre-existing Mediterranean urban traditions, with large quantities of public buildings and a strong belief in public benefaction. However, Gaul and Britain had no pre-existing tradition of urbanism before the Roman conquest, and the Romans imposed urban networks on these provinces. The extent to which urban life ever successfully took root in Britain is a heavily debated subject. Some early towns appear to have been successful, particularly those associated with the army or adminis-tration such as London, Chester and York. A number of *colonia*, inhabited by retired army veterans, such as Colchester and Lincoln also appear to have been successful. Notably, these towns were strongly influenced by communities from outside Britain who may have already been inculcated with the idea of town life. However, by the third century it was clear that whilst many towns continued to thrive, others were showing increasing evidence of difficulties.

They seem to have failed to develop as economic centres and instead survived primarily as administrative enclaves. Consequently, there appears to have been a decline in the level of construction of new public buildings, and those which had already been built often changed their use. They did, though, seem to continue as population centres, and contained large town houses. This slight decline in urbanism only appears to have applied to the larger Roman planned towns, there was a large number of smaller towns which appear to have developed organically, and these seem to have continued to act as centres for production and exchange well into the fourth century.

In Gaul, Britain's closest neighbour, the larger towns appear to have undergone a slow metamorphosis. Frequently, there appears to have been a period of shrinkage and retrenchment, leaving a smaller defended *enceinte*, which may have housed the administrative facilities of the *civitas*, including the bishop. These changes were traditionally related to the affects of the barbarian invasions of the 260s and 270s. However, there is increasing evidence to show that there was often still occupation outside the walled area, and that this process took place over a long period. In many ways in Britain the changes in urbanism differed from those in Gaul, where the change from early to late Roman towns was more pronounced. In particular they appear to have undergone a major decline in population, and the smaller towns also decline significantly in comparison with British examples.

However, despite the apparent greater urban transformations of Gaul, it was in the towns that the Gallic church appears to have found its roots. Almost all the evidence for stone churches and the structures associated with ecclesiastical complexes dates to the fifth century. The earlier fourth-century churches were smaller in size and less evidence survives for them. In this respect the Romano-British urban churches are very similar to those in Gaul, the real differences between the two areas did not really develop until the fifth century; this divergence is likely to have had as much to do with the differing nature of early medieval urbanism as the relative success or failure of the Church.

The possible Romano-British churches from cities appear to have varied in size. Those from Lincoln, Silchester and Colchester were fairly small, suggesting a relatively small congregation. However, the possible Christian basilica from London would have been more substantial. Ironically, the city of London underwent the most significant decline in size in the later Roman period, as the long-distance trade on which its wealth was based shrank. However, it continued to be the most important administrative centre in Britain, and if the basilica was indeed a church, then its size may reflect this administrative importance. Whilst the other urban churches are likely to have been funded by the local community, the London church could well have been an imperial foundation, hence its scale. However, the small size of the other churches need not automatically indicate a poor congregation. As we have already seen, there was a decline in public building in British towns,

though this went hand in hand with a increased investment in large rural villas, some almost palatial in scale. It is this decision by the local elites not to invest in urban building projects which may explain the lack of major urban churches in Roman Britain. Given the relative lack of income for the bishops they may well have lived in typical Roman urban houses, rather than purpose-built complexes adjacent to their churches, making them harder to spot archaeologically.

But if there is little evidence for substantial church buildings within Romano-British towns, the evidence from cemeteries is different. If, as has been argued in this book, the simple 'managed' cemeteries with west-east aligned grave-goods were predominantly Christian then it appears that large numbers of Romano-British towns had Christian communities burying their dead in the local cemeteries. They appear to have been particularly associated with the small towns, such as Alcester, Alchester, Ashton and Great Casterton, rather than the larger *civitas* capitals, although some are associated with these bigger towns, such as the Batchwood cemetery at St Albans, Poundbury and Butt Road. These cemeteries are notable for the lack of expressions of wealth, although the exception is the Poundbury cemetery, with its decorated mausolea.

Other less spectacular fragments of Christianity from urban contexts in town include several vessels with *chi-rho* symbols carved as graffiti on their bases. Amongst these finds are pieces of a grey ware storage jar from Colchester with a *chi-rho* on the rim, a sherd from a black ware cooking jar from Exeter with the sign on the shoulder and a colour-coated bowl from Kelvedon with religious graffiti on the base. Such marks were not limited to pottery vessels and a small *chi-rho* was found scratched onto the base of a pewter bowl from Caerwent. The reasons behind the carving of these small symbols are unclear, though they do not seem to be used in an official context. They could be simple good-luck or protective charms, although they clearly show a familiarity with Christian symbolism.

The most striking aspect of Christianity in large Romano-British cities is its relatively low level. The churches are mainly small and unimpressive and the other evidence such as the graffiti is important, but does not indicate a large investment in religious objects. Although there is evidence for Christian cemeteries these are far more common from small towns and large rural settlements. Unlike their Gaulish counterparts the important Roman cities of Britain appear not to have become important centres of Christianity. Although some cities, such as the provincial capitals, may have had bishops and associated episcopal complexes the towns appear to have never developed large urban congregations. However, this does not mean that the Church in Britain was necessarily stunted. To better understand the spread of Christianity we need to turn to the wider rural landscape of Britain, with its small market towns and large rural centres. It is here that we can get a better understanding of the way in which Christianity integrated with late Roman society.

Eastern England

If Christianity appears to have failed to take root in the larger towns it seems to have been more successful in some rural areas, particularly East Anglia and the East Midlands. It is this area that has provided the evidence for most lead tanks and Christian hoards. However, as we saw in earlier chapters this may be because a pre-existing tradition of placing votive objects in ritual pits or watery locations was strongest in this region. This would mean that the apparent focus of Christian activity here might have been caused by local traditions of religious worship which left a distinctive archaeological footprint. However, these ritually deposited objects, as well as the evidence from cemeteries and possible churches means that we can begin to see quite dense landscapes of Christian activity. The area around Icklingham with its dense pattern of Christian and pagan objects has already been explored in detail, but other areas of this region also show relatively dense levels of Christian remains.

The large rural settlement of Ashton lies close to the River Nene on the road leading to Water Newton. It is a typical example of a Roman undefended small town with properties strung out along the main road and smaller side roads providing access to the other buildings. To the north of the main road a series of large ditched enclosures were built. The town contains an excellent example of a 'managed' cemetery, which stood to the south-west of the main built-up area. This burial site contrasted with the expected cluster of burials in varied positions in the rear of the enclosures built along the main road. Nearby, at the south-west angle of a crossroads stood a large structure with a courtyard. The presence of five furnaces and large quantities of iron slag suggested that this was probably a blacksmith's workshop. In the northern part of the courtyard was a deep well. A complete lead tank with the *chi-rho* monogram came from this well, along with fragments of a second tank. This conjunction of two Christian lead tanks and a Christian cemetery is a clear indicator of the level of the support of the church in this region.

If we zoom out from the settlement of Ashton we can see that it is just one of many sites which have produced evidence for Christianity. Ten miles to the north was the small town of Great Chesterton, also sitting on the River Nene. Just outside the town, the famous Water Newton treasure was discovered. To the west, at Orton Longueville a strap-end showing a Christian peacock symbol was found. Another was found ten miles to the south of Ashton at Thrapston, not far from the Roman small town at Titchmarsh. A further cluster of Christian belt equipment was found further south, with two peacock decorated strap-ends from Milton Keynes (Bucks.) and one bearing a *chi-rho* from Sandy (Beds.). A peacock-decorated belt buckle was also found around 30 miles to the west at the small town of *Tripontium* (Cave's End Farm, Warks.). Probable Christian cemeteries were found at a number of small towns in the

area including one from the large ironworking settlement at Laxton (Northants) and others at Bletsoe (Beds.) and Great Casterton (Rutland).

The most important aspects of Roman Christianity in the east of England are the contrasts between the dense patterns of lead tanks, cemeteries and hoards and the almost complete lack of church structures. The church at Icklingham is very small, and sites such as Ivy Chimneys, Witham, have produced no convincing evidence of a significant church building despite the presence of a font. However, the discovery of extremely wealthy hoards, such as that from Water Newton, show that the Christian congregations in this area were not poor. The lack of investment in church buildings appears not to have been caused by poverty. Instead it seems to be part of a wider difference between western and eastern England. The east of England has a wider lack of extensive investment in architecturally elaborate buildings. Unlike the south-west there appears not to have been a late Roman flowering of villa construction, despite the continued success of the small Roman towns, such as Water Newton and Ashton. The lack of church building is an indicator of a wider difference in the way in which wealth was deployed in eastern England. Rather than spending surplus on building pagan temples, Christian churches or secular buildings such as villas, excess wealth seems to have been spent on more portable indicators of wealth, such as silver and gold plate, jewellery and other smaller objects.

Western England

This emphasis on portable religious objects at the expense of investment in buildings contrasts with the pattern in south-western Britain. In the fourth century a series of splendid and architecturally elaborate villas were built in this region, and there was an apparent flowering of 'villa life'. These large villas were found particularly in the areas surrounding the provincial capital of Cirencester (*Corinium*) and the *civitas* capital Dorchester. The fourth century also saw an increase in the number of rural temples being built, whilst at the same time there was a decrease in the number of urban temples. A mid fourth-century peak is found for both rural temples and villas. Although most pronounced in the south-west this broad pattern is found across much of southern and central England, although not as we have seen the East Midlands and East Anglia.

This expression of religious belief and social status through architectural elaboration extends to Christianity. It is in these areas that we have best built evidence for the religion. To the east are the wall paintings of Lullingstone. Although outside the main area of fourth-century building it was one of a cluster of high-status villas in the north of Kent. In the south-west we have already seen the clearly Christian mosaics at Frampton and Hinton St Mary.

Perhaps the greater interest in using buildings to express social identity explains why the cemetery at Poundbury contained so many mausolea.

Although bricks, mortar and tesserae appear to have been the most obvious ways of demonstrating power they were not the only ones. There is no clear evidence for a large-scale tradition of votive hoarding and deposition, though individual Christian objects are known. For example, silver rings with *chi-rho* symbols are known from a number of villa sites. A lead tank was also found in the possible small town at Bourton-on-the-Water. As in eastern Britain there is also ample evidence for Christian burial. As well as the cemeteries at Poundbury, Dorset, and Ilchester there are simple managed cemeteries outside small towns, such as Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxon.) and Tiddington (Warks.).

Christianity and the army

So far the two main patterns of Christian worship discussed have been defined geographically, with a broad east-west divide. However, many of the major divisions in Romano-British society were based as much on social groups as regional variations. Perhaps the best example of a regionally diffuse social group is the army. Although the *limitatenses* were by definition found mainly on the borders of the diocese, the *comitatenses* would have been stationed all over Roman Britain.

The relationship between the Roman army and Christianity in Britain is one that recent scholarship has changed our understanding of most radically. When Jocelyn Toynbee wrote her overview of Christianity in Roman Britain in 1953 she noted that 'The picture painted by archaeology is . . . almost wholly civilian in its context'. In a more recent exploration of the topic G.R. Watson added little. Much of the evidence for the Roman army's interest in the religion appeared to have been primarily negative, relating to apparent destruction of pagan religious sites in military areas, such as the destruction of the mithraeum at Carrawburgh (Northumberland). However, archaeological remains of Christianity are being increasingly recognised.

The first class of evidence we have for military Christianity is the remains of churches from forts. In chapter 3 we saw that probable or possible churches have been found at Richborough (Kent), South Shields (Tyne and Wear), Housesteads (Northumberland), Chesterholm/*Vindolanda* (Northumberland) and Birdoswald (Northumberland). These appear to have been built in either the main principia or headquarters area of the fort or the north-west corner. The range of building materials appears to have been varied depending on locality. The Richborough church was probably built of timber and supported on post-pads, but in the north where there was easier access to stone the buildings appear to have mainly been of stone. There is difficulty in providing precise dates for these buildings, although they are likely to have been later

fourth-century in date, rather than earlier. The two churches built on the site of the headquarters buildings, South Shields and Chesterholm are very late, possibly even early fifth century. Their position suggests that they may be replacing earlier pagan regimental shrines. It is noticeable that at Richborough and possibly Housesteads there are the remains of possible fonts.

The second major class of evidence for Christianity in the military areas of Britain are gravestones. The recognition of a distinct group of late Roman memorial stones with likely Christian epitaphs is important, as they gives us a direct insight into the composition of the congregations. Tombstones from Cawfields and Templeborough record the burial of soldiers from outside Britain: Dagvalda from Pannonia (present day Serbia) and Crotus son of Vindex from Gaul. These are the only inscriptions which explicitly record members of the army. However, it is possible that the men recorded on tomb-stones from Brougham and Maryport were also soldiers. Crucially, women and children also appear on some of these stones, both as commemorator and commemorated. Finally, as well as the two tombs of foreigners mentioned above there are at least two on which the name is clearly of native British origin: Tancorix, recorded on a stone from Old Carlisle and Rianorix on one from Maryport. These burial monument gives us a good cross-section of the Christian communities associated with these military churches. They included soldiers and civilians, women and children, natives and foreigners. This implies that the churches associated with forts were serving the wider community and were not limited to the military, although it is possible that there are churches still to be found in the vicinity, frequently associated with military sites. The presence of fonts also implies that these churches were at the centre of an active congregation in which people were undergoing instruction and religious education. The military churches were clearly more than simple regimental chapels, but had responsibilities beyond the walls of the forts.

So far most of this evidence has focused on evidence from the military borders of Britain, and is primarily related to the religious affiliations of the *limitatenses*. This is partly because it is easier to recognise distinct military communities along the well-defended frontiers. The *comitatenses* were billeted amongst civilians in towns in the civilian zones. This makes it harder to recognise the military communities against the background noise of civilian occupation. One of the few groups of objects that may well be a good indicator of a military presence in civilian areas are the distinct group of belt buckles discussed in chapter 5. Even these may have also been used by members of the imperial civil service. The thirteen belt buckles or strap-ends with Christian symbols from Britain are found spread widely across the civilian area of Roman Britain, straddling the broad divide in Christian practice noted between the east and west. They come from a range of sites, small towns, such as *Tripontium*, Harlow and Kenchester to villas such as Wortley (Glos.) and Beadlam (North Yorks.) and other rural settlements such as Wavendon Gate (Bucks.) and Rushall Down

(Wilts.). It is noticeable though that none of these objects come from *civitas* capitals or other large towns. If these buckles and strap-ends were indeed worn by the mobile field army it suggests that they were stationed out in small towns and rural sites rather than in large urban centres.

Allowing for the difficulties in clearly distinguishing military communities in civilian areas it does appear that Christianity was important within the Roman army in Britain. No pagan religious imagery appears on belt buckles and strap-ends and the stone gravestones of northern Britain appear to be primarily Christian. The presence of a series of churches in important locations within Roman forts is also highly significant. Other Christian objects from military sites include rings bearing *chi-rho* monograms found at Brancaster (Suffolk) and Brough-under-Stainmore (Cumbria). There are also two hoards with possible military connections; the group of silver objects found in the Tyne near Corbridge, and the hoard of objects from Traprain Law. These may both also indicate wealthy Christian communities in the north of Britain. It is also important to remember that if St Patrick is to be located in the north of Britain, possible from a vicus along Hadrian's Wall, then this is further evidence for Christianity in the military zone.

It is increasingly being recognised that in the late Roman period the close relationship between the Roman army units along the northern frontiers and the nearby civilian settlements led to the development of a distinct Romano-British military culture. It is not possible to separate the religion of soldiers from their wives, children and associates. The evidence from the gravestones suggests both military and civilians were members of these northern Christian communities.

Relationships between Christians and pagans

Even the most optimistic advocate of the success of Christianity in Roman Britain would not deny that the majority of the population remained pagan. The only debate is how great this majority was. Undoubtedly there would have been immense regional variation. Although Christianity was not the dominant religion in purely numerical terms, its position as the ideological arm of the Empire allowed it to 'punch above its weight'. The relationship between paganism and Christianity must have varied. We know from the lead tablet from Bath that at least one person saw religious life in Britain as divided between Christians and others, he called 'gentiles'. It has often been suggested that the relationship between the two camps was sometimes tense, and there may have been cases when Christians actively destroyed pagan religious sites in acts of religiously motivated violence. The mithraea at London and Carrawburgh (Northumberland) were both apparently victims of vicious attempts to damage them. The statues in Carrawburgh were deliberately broken, but the altars remained in position. Although the Walbrook

Mithraeum was attacked in the early fourth century, pagan worship soon resumed there. In other cases pagan altars or tombstones were reused for secular purposes, such as road repair in Corbridge or as linings for burials at Ancaster and York. The treatment of pagan sculpture was not always so functional; three altars and five sculptures were tipped into a well in Lower Slaughter (Glos.). The problems with these apparent outbursts of anti-pagan violence include the difficulty in dating them, and deducing the motivation. For example, it is not clear whether the destruction of Wallbrook Mithraeum pre- or post-dated the freedom of the Church. Even if it did post-date 313 it is uncertain whether Christian communities at this early date would have been strong enough to attack a pagan religious site, particularly one with such close links to the military. The question of motivation applies to the destruction of the Carrawburgh temple; if it was a victim of Christian intolerance then why did the altars remain standing? In the case of the more functional reuse of sculpture there is no need to subscribe to an anti-pagan justification. The reuse of architectural stone or *spolia* for such practical purposes was widespread in the late Roman period, and need have no religious motivation. There were certainly outbursts of anti-pagan violence in Gaul, and Sulpicius Severus' *Life of St Martin* recorded this militant bishop's destruction of several pagan religious sites. However, the evidence that such campaigns were carried out in Britain is absent. Although there may have been occasional outbursts of intra-community violence, there seems to have been no orchestrated campaign against paganism.

The evidence for Christianity from Roman Britain is not vast, but it is respectable when compared with evidence for other specific cults. Considering that there were less than one hundred years between the freedom of the Church and the end of Roman rule in Britain the evidence is widespread and significant. There are certainly aspects of Christianity in which Britain appears to be very poorly provided, specifically church buildings. However, as we have seen there are very distinct methodological problems with distinguishing churches from secular buildings. Comparisons with the level of church building in Britain and the Continent often fails to compare like with like. There are definitely few certain fourth-century churches in Britain, but the same is true for much of Gaul, particularly the northern areas. Even many of the fourth-century Gaulish churches have only been recognised on the basis of continuity of ecclesiastical use on the site allowing the function of the site to be projected back into the fourth century. The perceived differences between Britain and Gaul are related more to the structure of fifth- and sixth-century Christianity than the situation in the fourth century. The unique aspects of Christianity in Britain such as the use of lead tanks and the plate hoards should be seen not as the idiosyncratic developments of an isolated and unorthodox church, but as typical of the range of religious practices in the Christian world in the fourth and fifth centuries. The historical evidence certainly shows that

in these centuries Britain was in frequent contact with important ecclesiastical figures in Gaul and elsewhere. It should come as no surprise to find that in the late fourth century Romano-British Christians were recorded by Jerome as pilgrims in the Holy Land.

The archaeological evidence from Britain shows that Christianity appears to have been accepted across much of the country, and was known from the northern borders on Hadrian's Wall to Richborough, the gateway to the Continent. Considering its wide distribution it is no surprise that there are variations in the way in which it was practised across the diocese. The biggest contrast is between the west and east of lowland Britain. In the east Christian belief appears to have incorporated the practice of votive deposition already common in pagan traditions in the area. In the west a greater emphasis appears to have been placed on building religious structures, both temples and Christian sites. These variations in Christian practice were clearly intimately related to the pre-existing nature of paganism in each region. Archaeology is also beginning to show the importance of Christianity in the army in Roman Britain. Along the northern border the Church seems to have had a particularly important role in both military and civilian life.

One of the most important differences between Britain and the rest of the Empire was the relationship between Christianity and towns. Across most of the Empire the Church was pre-eminently an urban phenomenon, with the most powerful communities being centred in the biggest towns. However, in *Britannia*, although the church appeared in towns it seems never to have bloomed. Churches are known, but they seem to be small. Instead it is in the countryside and the small towns in particular that Christianity appears to have been strongest. In the East Midlands in particular, many small towns have produced evidence of Christian communities, either in the form of cemeteries, baptismal tanks or other objects. Unlike Gaul these low-level urban centres continued to thrive in the fourth century, and it is in these thriving centres that the church appears to have really taken root, rather than the increasingly stale major towns. If it is the small towns and the countryside that were the homes for late Roman Britain's social vitality, then it is not surprising that these should be the prime breeding grounds of the Church rather than the larger towns. Although the impact of Anglo-Saxon political take-over wiped clean much of the slate in eastern England, the evidence from western Britain suggests that it was these smaller towns that continued to form the basis of the early medieval episcopal structure.

In a series of articles, Steven Basset has located a number of pre-Saxon dioceses in the West Midlands, which were often foci for later Saxon dioceses or minster churches. These centres were usually late Roman small towns. He suggests that St Helen's, Worcester, was a British foundation, only later being eclipsed by the cathedral. He tentatively outlines the former parish of St Helen's, relating it to a discrete territory around the city, which probably had

its origins in the Roman period. Elsewhere he explores the relationship between Lichfield and the Roman town at Wall (*Letocetum*). He suggests that the church of St Michael's at Lichfield is a British foundation, and that it was related to a putative earlier foundation at *Letocetum*, which can probably be identified with *Caer Lwytgoed* raided by Morfael, King of Powys, as recorded in the poem *Marwnad Cynddylan*, possibly in the seventh century. The poem seems to explicitly indicate that *Caer Lwytgoed* was the seat of a bishop:

> Magnificent was the combat, great the booty,
> Before Caer Lwytgoed Morfael took
> Fifteen hundred cattle and five herds of [?] swine
> Eighty stallions with their accompanying harness
> Not a single bishop in four corners
> Nor book-holding monks were afforded protection
> *Marwnad Cynddylan*
>
> (trans. Kirby 1977, 37)

He also suggests, with less certainty, that Wroxeter, with its minster church at St Andrew's and Gloucester, with the early church of St Mary de Lode were also centres of British pre-Saxon ecclesiastical territories, probably based on even earlier Roman territories.

It is the integration of Christianity into the rural world that allowed the Church to weather the disruptive effects of the warfare and political conflict of the fifth century. Although life in towns changed radically in this period, this did not trouble the Church, which was already developing a semi-rural rather than semi-urban infrastructure. It was the flexibility that this provided which allowed the Christian Church to re-emerge as the centrally important institution in the early medieval period. It is noticeable that early medieval writers such as Gildas firmly believed that Christianity was a Roman introduction, and there are no traditions of a renewed period of missionary activity or proselytising in the early fifth century. Many commentators have seen the failure of the Church in Romano-British towns as a failure of the Church elsewhere. Frend has suggested that the Church failed to develop in Britain, as there were no figures of the stature of Martin of Tours who were willingly to actively take the Church to the pagan rural areas surrounding the urban bastions of the faith. However, the nature of late Gaulish society was different to that in Britain. If Britain had no figure like St Martin, perhaps is because it did not need one.

The important role of the church in the transition into the post-Roman period also occurred in the north. The Church had made great progress amongst communities along the northern border, both military and civilian, if such a distinction can still be made at this period. Archaeological evidence is increasingly showing that many forts continued to be occupied into the fifth century. Long hall-type buildings have been excavated at Birdoswald, and

possible early medieval refortifications are known from other forts, such as South Shields. Christianity appears to have also continued to be important for many of these early medieval communities. A small portable altar of fifth- or sixth-century date has been found at Chesterholm. A rare early Christian gravestone has also been found nearby. It is the strength of Christianity in these areas in the fifth century which may explain the rapid expansion of the Church over the old political borders, and its rapid success in Dumfries and Galloway, particularly around the important monastic site of Whithorn. It is from these northern strongholds that the church may also have also have rapidly reached much of lowland Scotland.

By the end of the Late Roman period the Church was firmly established in Roman Britain and ready to be taken beyond the traditional edges of Empire. Loyalty to the Church was rapidly replacing loyalty to the Empire. By participating in the spread of Christendom it was possible to participate vicariously in the prestige and power of the Empire, without surrendering political power. The story of the rise and spread of the early medieval Church in Britain is not one for this book, but it would never have been possible without the initial success of the Romano-British Church in the fourth century.