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contents

british christian continuity in anglo–saxon england: the case of sherborne/ Lanprobi

Martin Grimmer

Abstract

A feature of recent work on early Anglo-Saxon England has been an emerging consensus that a substantial British population was subsumed under and persisted within Anglo-Saxon territorial boundaries as they expanded to the west and north. In such circumstances, it has been argued, British identity and culture continued within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. If there was a substantial British substrate, some evidence of their continued presence and influence should certainly be expected. The concept of continuity, however, is one fraught with problems concerning both its meaning and the evidence that would be necessary to establish such an eventuality. This is particularly the case in the ecclesiastical domain, where it is currently popular to assert that the Anglo-Saxon border kingdoms – Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria – were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries. The aim of this paper is to explore some of the difficulties associated with the term 'continuity' by examining the case of Sherborne, an early West Saxon monastery in Dorset, and the claim that it originated as a British community called *Lanprobi*.

A feature of recent work on early Anglo-Saxon England has been an emerging consensus that a substantial British population was subsumed under and persisted within Anglo-Saxon territorial boundaries as they expanded to the west and north.[1] In such circumstances, it has been argued

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[1] For example, D Banham, 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes: in search of the origins of English racism', *European Review of History* 1 (1994) 143-156, at p 143-144; S Bassett, 'How the west was won', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 11 (2000) 107-118, at p 107-111; S Crawford, 'Britons, Anglo-Saxons and the Germanic burial ritual' 45-72 in J Chapman and H Hamerow (eds), *Migrations and Invasions in Archaeological Explanation* (Oxford, 1997); M Gelling, *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1992) 53; *idem*, 'Why aren't we speaking Welsh?', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 6 (1993) 51-56, at p 55; N J Higham, *The Kingdom of Northumbria AD 350-1100* (Gloucestershire, 1993) 71, 99-104, 126; *idem*, *An English Empire: Bede and the Early Anglo-Saxon Kings* (Manchester, 1995) 232; *idem*, 'Britons in northern England in the early middle ages: through a thick glass darkly', *Northern History* 38 (2001) 5-25, at p 8, 13; C Phythian-Adams, *Land of the Cumbrians: A Study in British Provincial Origins* (Aldershot, 1996) 87; K Pretty, 'Defining the Magonsæte' 171-183 in S Bassett (ed), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester, 1989) at p 174; P Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800* (Cambridge, 1990) 23-24; I Smith, 'The origins and development of Christianity in North Britain and Southern Scotland' 19-37 in J Blair and C Pyrah (eds), *Church Archaeology: Research Directions for the Future*

that British identity and culture continued within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and indeed, if there was a substantial British substrate to the population of Anglo-Saxon England, some evidence of their continued presence and influence should on *a priori* grounds be expected. Many early medieval historians and archaeologists who study the transition from sub-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England have, therefore, become engaged in a love affair with this concept of 'continuity'. This is particularly the case in the ecclesiastical domain, where it is currently popular to assert that the Anglo-Saxon border kingdoms – Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria – were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries. My aim in this paper is to explore some of the difficulties associated with the term 'continuity' by examining the case of Sherborne, an early West Saxon monastery in Dorset, and the claim that it originated as a British community called *Lanprobi*.

To start with some general points about the concept of continuity, there is no doubt that it is one of fundamental interest to scholars researching the transition from British to Anglo-Saxon control.[2] Yet it is also one fraught with problems concerning both its meaning and the evidence that would be necessary to establish such an eventuality.[3] Indeed, what does the term 'continuity' actually mean? Does it refer to the survival of people, or of institutions, or of culture? Does the Anglo-Saxon occupation of an earlier British site represent a clear transition from British to Anglo-Saxon possession or simply its re-use after a lapse of decades or even centuries? Does the survival of a British Celtic place-name imply the survival of a British enclave, or simply that there were Britons in the vicinity to pass on a name? Christopher Snyder asserts that the continuity issue is partly a semantic one, that continuity means different things to different scholars.[4] John Blair similarly states that the question of continuity is often posed too starkly, without appreciation of what is

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(London, 1996) at p 29; B Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990) 86; *idem.*, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995) 48.

[2] J Blair, 'Churches in the early English landscape: social and cultural contexts' 6-19 in Blair and Pyrah (eds), *Church Archaeology* at p 6.

[3] L Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare among the Britons and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1987) 271; D Brown, 'Problems of continuity' 16-19 in T Rowley (ed), *Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Landscape* (Oxford, 1974); M Faull, 'British Survival in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria' 1-56 in L Laing (ed), *Studies in Celtic Survival* (Oxford, 1977) at p 1; C Hills, 'Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England', *History Today* 40 (1990) 46-52, at p 49; R Reece, 'Models of continuity', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 8 (1989) 231-6; Yorke, *Wessex*, 48-9.

[4] C Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons A.D. 400-600* (Pennsylvania, 1998) 220.

actually meant.[5]   In addition to this, 'genuine' continuity needs to be distinguished from 'created' continuity. It must be recognised that visible representations of the past – such as buildings, monuments, walls and cemeteries – could actively be used by early medieval peoples in order to create an impression of longevity and tradition.[6] This would be similar to the creation of genealogies and origin myths in order to invent a link between the present and some legitimating past.[7] For example, Anglo-Saxon minsters were often built on or in older Roman buildings, and it has been argued that by doing so, the Anglo-Saxon church was thus appropriating the Roman past in order to create an impression of continuity and venerability.[8] Richard Bradley talks of the imagined or remote past being used as a 'resource in the hands of the living', for particular groups to establish their own unchallengeable position of dominance.[9] He suggests that this practice was especially likely to occur during times of uncertainty and change, such as the early Anglo-Saxon period. This means that one must be aware of the deliberate and specious appropriation of the past to legitimise control over people, land and resources.[10] Thus, the continued use of an older site by Anglo-Saxons might have multiple interpretations, in addition to a genuine link with the immediate British past.[11]

As stated earlier, the question of continuity is particularly acute in the ecclesiastical domain, my focus in this paper. Religion can operate as a mechanism for creating and cementing a shared social identity, and once the Anglo-Saxons converted, the potential for cultural intercourse and influence

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[5]   J Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon minsters: a topographical review' 226-66 in J Blair and R Sharpe (eds), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992) at p 235.

[6]   Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon minsters', 242, states that 'contemporaries, like ourselves, were capable of making deductions (right or wrong) from physical evidence'.

[7]   W Pohl, 'Ethnic names and identities in the British Isles: a comparative perspective' 7-40 in J Hines (ed), *Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997) at p 9.

[8]   Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon minsters', 241; *idem*, 'Churches in the early English landscape', 6-7; N Edwards, 'Identifying the archaeology of the early church in Wales and Cornwall' 49-62 in Blair and Pyrah (eds), *Church Archaeology* at p 51; H Williams, 'Ancient landscapes and the dead: the re-use of prehistoric and Roman monuments as early Anglo-Saxon burial sites', *Medieval Archaeology* 41 (1997) 1-32, at p 13.

[9]   R Bradley, 'Time regained: the creation of continuity', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 140 (1987) 1-17, at p 3-4. See also Williams, 'Ancient landscapes and the dead', 24-26.

[10]   Williams, 'Ancient landscapes and the dead', 26.

[11]   Williams, 'Ancient landscapes and the dead', 24. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to argue that the re-use of a Bronze Age barrow for the placing of Anglo-Saxon dead represented the survival of a sub-British cultural practice, although some understanding of the ancient sanctity of the site might be assumed.

with the Christian Britons would have been greatly increased.[12] As stated, it is currently popular to assert that the West Saxon, Mercian and to a lesser extent Northumbrian kingdoms were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence, especially on their western and northern margins, prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries.[13] However, uncovering evidence for this putative contribution is not so straightforward. The siting of an early Anglo-Saxon church over or near some previous British or Romano-British site can often be verified, such as over a cemetery, a holy well, a Roman mausoleum, or some manner of curvilinear enclosure. Yet the meaning of such an occurrence is less clear. To demonstrate Christian continuity from British to Anglo-Saxon periods at any given site requires the enumeration of excavated phases of continued occupation and usage.[14] Of more benefit than archaeological evidence would be evidence for the continued veneration of a British saint by the Anglo-Saxon church, such as seems to have occurred with Saints Alban and Ninian,[15] or evidence for the perpetuation of British Christian communities, as may be indicated by Anglo-Saxon place-names containing the *eccles*-element.[16] The perpetuation of a Celtic dedication from before the Anglo-

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[12] N J Higham, *The Northern Counties to AD 1000* (London, 1986) 27; C Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (Berkeley, 1981) 354-5.

[13] For example, S Bassett, 'Church and diocese in the West Midlands: the transition from British to Anglo-Saxon control' 13-40 in Blair and Sharpe (eds), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*; *idem*, 'Medieval ecclesiastical organisation in the vicinity of Wroxeter and its British antecedents', *Journal of the British Archaeological Assoeiation* 145 (1992) 1-28; Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon minsters', 265; *idem*, 'Churches in the early English landscape', 6; P H Hase, 'The church in the Wessex heartlands', 47-81 in M Aston and C Lewis (eds), *The Medieval Landscape of Wessex* (Oxford, 1994) at p 51; Higham, *Kingdom of Northumbria*, 101; *idem*, 'Britons in northern England', 12; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 78-79; Smith, 'Origins and development of Christianity', 24-25; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 266.

[14] This is cogently explained by Blair, 'Churches in the early English landscape', 7.

[15] N Orme, *English Church Dedications: With a Survey of Cornwall and Devon* (Exeter, 1996) 20-21; Yorke, *Wessex*, 178. On the Anglo-Saxons' recognition of Saints Alban and Ninian, see Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, I.7 for Alban and III.4 for Ninian. All references to the *Historia ecclesiastica* (henceforth *HE*) will be cited by book and chapter number from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ed and trans B Colgrave and R A B Mynors (Oxford, 1969).

[16] *Eccles* is a place-name element which appears either by itself or as a compound (eg Eccleshill, Ecclesfield, Eaglesfield, and Exley). Its original source is the Latin *ecclesia*, but it is generally accepted as having been adopted into Anglo-Saxon usage via the British *egles*, and not directly from the Latin. The meaning of the term as it was used in post-Roman Britain is a matter of some debate, specifically with regard to whether it referred to a British church or simply to a community of British Christians. On the identification and meaning of *eccles*- names, see K Cameron, 'Eccles in English place-names' 87-92 in M W Barley and R P C

Saxon conquest of a British region would imply the continuation of a church institution, not just the consecutive use of the same site. More useful again would be evidence for British involvement in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon immigrants.

For continuity to be established, some thought must also be given to what would actually have been passed on from British to Anglo-Saxon periods. It needs to be determined, therefore, at least to some degree, what existed before the Anglo-Saxons arrived. And this is certainly part of the problem with assertions of British Christian continuity: there is often no clear enunciation of what was continued because outside the evidence of Gildas and Patrick, we know very little about sub-Roman Christianity and therefore very little about what was actually there to be passed on. In addition, British Christian structures are very difficult to identify: possible church sites often share features with pagan temples;[17] in some areas there are no church buildings surviving at all from the sub-Roman period, probably due to a preference for timber construction,[18] and Christian cemeteries are notoriously difficult to date except by the radio-carbon method.[19] Thus, there are obstacles to even establishing simple locational continuity.

In order to illustrate some of the challenges associated with trying to establish continuity, the case of Sherborne and *Lanprobi* will now be considered. The circumstances surrounding the foundation and early history of the West Saxon monastery of Sherborne in Dorset are, predictably, obscure. According to Bede, the West Saxon diocese was divided into two on the death of Bishop Hædde in 705; Aldhelm became the bishop of the new western diocese, and Daniel bishop of the eastern diocese.[20] In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Aldhelm's bishopric is referred to as being 'west of the wood' or 'west of Selwood'.[21] Selwood Forest stood

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Hanson (eds), *Christianity in Britain, 300-700* (Leicester, 1968) at p 87; M Gelling, *Signposts to the Past – Place-names and the History of England* (London, 1978) 82; K H Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953) 227; Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, 262.

[17] M Costen, *The Origins of Somerset* (Manchester, 1992) 73-74; Hase, 'The church in the Wessex heartlands', 47; Yorke, *Wessex*, 149-150.

[18] Bede, in discussing the church at Whithorn (Galloway), noted that it was unusual for the Britons to build in stone (*HE* III.4).

[19] H Geake, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion-Period England, c.600-850* (Oxford, 1997) 132-136; J Hines, 'Philology, archaeology and the *adventus Saxonum vel Anglorum*' 17-36 in A Bammesberger and A Wollmann (eds), *Britain 400-600: Language and History* (Heidelberg, 1990) at p 28.

[20] *HE* V.18. M Lapidge and M Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge, 1979) 10. Note that the division of the West Saxon diocese could have occurred early in 706; this date may have marked Aldhelm's investiture as bishop.

[21] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 709 A, 'Here Aldhelm passed away: he was bishop to the west of the wood'; 709 B '… to the west of Selwood'. All references to the

with the Christian Britons would have been greatly increased.[12] As stated, it is currently popular to assert that the West Saxon, Mercian and to a lesser extent Northumbrian kingdoms were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence, especially on their western and northern margins, prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries.[13] However, uncovering evidence for this putative contribution is not so straightforward. The siting of an early Anglo-Saxon church over or near some previous British or Romano-British site can often be verified, such as over a cemetery, a holy well, a Roman mausoleum, or some manner of curvilinear enclosure. Yet the meaning of such an occurrence is less clear. To demonstrate Christian continuity from British to Anglo-Saxon periods at any given site requires the enumeration of excavated phases of continued occupation and usage.[14] Of more benefit than archaeological evidence would be evidence for the continued veneration of a British saint by the Anglo-Saxon church, such as seems to have occurred with Saints Alban and Ninian,[15] or evidence for the perpetuation of British Christian communities, as may be indicated by Anglo-Saxon place-names containing the *eccles*-element.[16] The perpetuation of a Celtic dedication from before the Anglo-

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[14] This is cogently explained by Blair, 'Churches in the early English landscape', 7.

[15] N Orme, *English Church Dedications: With a Survey of Cornwall and Devon* (Exeter, 1996) 20-21; Yorke, *Wessex*, 178. On the Anglo-Saxons' recognition of Saints Alban and Ninian, see Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, I.7 for Alban and III.4 for Ninian. All references to the *Historia ecclesiastica* (henceforth *HE*) will be cited by book and chapter number from *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* ed and trans B Colgrave and R A B Mynors (Oxford, 1969).

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to the north-east of Sherborne on the western border of current-day Wiltshire, and may once have acted as a barrier into Somerset and Dorset. William of Malmesbury, writing in the first half of the twelfth century, says that the seat of the new western diocese was Sherborne, where Aldhelm built 'a magnificent cathedral', which was still standing in William's time.[22] Apart from these references, however, there is little documentary evidence concerning the establishment of Sherborne, and William's statement is the earliest surviving reference to a cathedral church there.[23] Few early charters have survived, due in part to the reorganisation and division of the Sherborne-based diocese in the early tenth century (c 909), and the removal of the see of Sherborne to Salisbury in the 1070s.[24] No obvious foundation charter exists.[25] Despite this lack of early information, it has been claimed that Sherborne could well have had a pre-Saxon origin with some level of continuity existing between British and West Saxon communities.[26]

The claim for a pre-Saxon British community at Sherborne rests upon a single reference to a grant by King Cenwalh (642-72) in a later list of royal benefactors of Sherborne and the lands which they granted.[27] This list survives in a late fourteenth-century manuscript – one of the Cottonian manuscripts[28] – although it appears to have been copied from an earlier list

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Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (henceforth *ASC*) will be cited by year from *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* ed and trans M Swanton (London, 2000). The *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed A Campbell (London, 1962) 21, states that Aldhelm's diocese was vulgarly called 'Selwoodshire'. According to Asser in his *Life of King Alfred* (*Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and other Contemporary Sources*, trans S Keynes and M Lapidge (Harmondsworth, 1983) ch 55), Selwood was called *Coit Maur* in (Old) Welsh. Selwood was a possible location for the battle at *Peonnum*, recorded in the *ASC* 658, when Cenwalh drove the Britons to the Parrett.

22 *Gesta Pontificum* V.223 (cited by book and chapter from *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi: De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum* ed N E S A Hamilton (London, 1870)). See also Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: Prose Works*, 10.

23 J P H Gibb and R D H Gem, 'The Anglo-Saxon cathedral at Sherborne', *Archaeological Journal* 132 (1975) 71-110, at p 105.

24 H Edwards, *The Charters of the Early West Saxon Kingdom* (Oxford, 1988) 238-239.

25 See M A O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne* (Oxford, 1988) 4-5.

26 For example, K Barker, 'The early history of Sherborne' 77-116 in S Pearce (ed), *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 1982) 78; Costen, *Origins of Somerset*, 78; R Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* (London, 1997) 19; also Hase, 'The church in the Wessex heartlands', 50, who asserts that 'there can be little doubt that Sherborne was a major ecclesiastical centre well before Aldhelm's date'.

27 K Barker, 'Sherborne in Dorset: an early ecclesiastical settlement and its estate', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 3 (1984) 1-33, at p 1.

28 *British Library MS Cotton Faustina A.ii.* See the discussion in O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, xx, xliii-xliv.

probably compiled some time after 1035, the date of the latest grant mentioned.[29] Cenwalh's donation heads the list, in which he is said to have granted 100 hides at a location called *Lanprobi*.[30] The *lann-* element in the name indicates a British churchyard or sacred enclosure,[31] and, combined with the name of a putatively early saint, *Lanprobi* appears to translate as the 'churchyard (or monastery) of Probus'. What is significant about this grant is that it is described with a British place-name which seems to imply the existence of a British Christian community venerating a St Probus within the vicinity of Sherborne prior to the establishment of the West Saxon bishopric (Cenwalh was dead by the time of Aldhelm's creation as bishop). Thus it is not surprising that it is used as evidence of British Christian continuity. Indeed, the British character of the name moved H P R Finberg in 1964 to suggest that *Lanprobi* may have been 'the older British name of the monastic property on which the town was afterwards built'.[32] Patrick Hase has similarly asserted that 'there can be little doubt that Sherborne was a major ecclesiastical centre well before Aldhelm's date'.[33] A number of difficulties emerge, however, if *Lanprobi* is to be identified as the progenitor of the Saxon abbey.

To begin with, the actual site of *Lanprobi* as a possible British community at Sherborne has been somewhat controversial. If one were to

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[29] Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 243-249; H P R Finberg, *The Early Charters of Wessex* (Leicester, 1964) 155. The list is not written in chronological order. It will henceforth be referred to as the 'Cottonian list'.

[30] Cenwalh's grant is recorded '*Kenewalc rex dedit lanprobi de c hydis*' (Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 245; O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 81). The 100 hides itself appears to be rather too round and too large a figure to be genuine.

[31] *Lann* is a Celtic place-name element which appears to have gone out of use at a relatively early date. It was certainly obsolete in Cornish by the fourteenth century. When it was first used in a Christian context in the south-west it probably meant 'enclosure', but later acquired the meanings of monastery, churchyard and enclosed cemetery; but not 'church building' as it did in Wales. Approximately fifty Cornish church sites (about twenty-five per cent of the total) have a name containing the *lann-* element; there are also fifty secular *lann* place-names. On the *lann-* element, see A Preston-Jones, 'Decoding Cornish churchyards' 105-124 in N Edwards and A Lane (eds), *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992) at pp 108, 115; L Mac Mathúna, 'Observations on Irish lann "(piece of) land: (church) building" and compounds', *Ériu* 48 (1997) 153-60; L Olson, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall* (Woodbridge, 1989) 3; O J Padel, 'Cornish names of Parish churches', *Cornish Studies* 4/5 (1976-77) 15-27; S Pearce, *The Kingdom of Dumnonia - Studies in History and Tradition in South Western Britain AD 350-1150* (Cornwall, 1978) 73, 135.

[32] H P R Finberg, *Lucerna: Studies of Some Problems in the Early History of England* (London, 1964) 98. This is a view also supported by Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 99. O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 83, credits S Baring-Gould and J Fisher, writing 1907-1913, with this suggestion.

[33] Hase, 'The church in the Wessex heartlands', 50.

suppose continuity from British to Anglo-Saxon communities, the logical place to look would be the site of the West Saxon abbey. However, it is now generally accepted that if a British community existed in the vicinity, it should be located at the hill where the Norman castle stands, about one kilometre away to the east of the abbey.[34] The case for this location primarily rests on the evidence of later papal bulls. In a bull of Pope Eugenius III, dated 1145, a *'Propeschirche'* – which, accepting certain linguistic problems, may be a later rendering of 'Probus's church' – is mentioned among the possessions of Sherborne.[35] More illuminating is the bull of Pope Alexander III, dated to 1163, which mentions the 'The church of St Mary Magdalene situated next to Sherborne castle with the chapels of St Michael and St Probus [*ecclesiam sanctae Mariae Magdalenae sitam iuxta castrum Sherborne cum capellis sancti Michaelis et sancti Probi*]'.[36] This statement clearly tells of the existence of a dedication to St Probus, belonging to the church of St Mary Magdalene beside the castle.[37] Further support for the castle location derives from the discovery of burials at the site, in levels earlier than that of the Norman castle, perhaps as early as the seventh century.[38] Thus, the castle hill, rather than the Saxon abbey, emerges as the most probable the site of *Lanprobi*, and so there does not

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[34] J Blair, 'Sherborne' 418-419 in M Lapidge, J Blair, S Keynes and D Scragg (eds), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1999); Faith, *English Peasantry*, 19; L Keen, 'The topography of Sherborne, Dorset – Lanprobus', *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* 103 (1981) 132-4.

[35] L Keen, 'The towns of Dorset' 203-247 in J Haslam (ed), *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England* (Chichester, 1984) at p 211; O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 85. As this reference occurs after the c 909 division of the diocese, it can be reasonably assumed that *Propeschirche* was located within Dorset, although the bull provides no definitive geographical indicator. *Propeschirche* is linked in the bull with an area of land called '*Stocland cum silvis et pratis et cum duobus molendinis*', that is, with woods and fields and two mills. A 'Stockland' is mentioned in a charter of King Æthelred dated to 998, which sanctioned the refoundation of the minster at Sherborne, and the name appears in various other medieval and early modern references to the tenants and manor of Sherborne (see Keen, 'The towns of Dorset', 211-212). By association, *Propeschirche* could be located in the vicinity of the town. This eventuality is discussed by O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 86.

[36] Barker, 'Sherborne in Dorset', 4; Keen, 'The towns of Dorset', 211.

[37] Finberg, *Lucerna*, 98, in apparent contradiction of his earlier statement, regarded the identification of *Propeschirche* and *capella sancti Probi* with *Lanprobi* as 'almost certain', and his assertion appears to be supported by other historians. See Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 251; D Hinton, 'The topography of Sherborne – early Christian?', *Antiquity* 55 (1981) 222-223, at p 223; Keen, 'Topography of Sherborne, Dorset', 133; Yorke, *Wessex*, 178.

[38] Keen, 'Topography of Sherborne, Dorset', 133-134; *idem*, 'The towns of Dorset', 212.

seem to be a scenario of re-use of the same site.[39]   The castle site is also
consistent with the evidence of other British settlements in the region that
are found on hill-sites, such as Glastonbury Tor, Congresbury, Cannington
and Lamyatt Beacon (Somerset).[40]

Very little information. exists about the figure of Probus which
might be used to assist in the identification of the *Lanprobi* site, or in the
verification of a link with the dedication referred to in the papal bulls.
There is no surviving *Life* or oral tradition concerning Probus which might
shed more light on the origin of the saint, and the name is otherwise
unknown in Wales and Brittany.[41]   The earliest surviving reference to a
British saint bearing this, or a similar, name is to a 'Propus', recorded in a
tenth-century list of Cornish parochial saints.[42]   The name appears next in a
Cornish place-name in *Domesday Book* – *Sanctus Probus/Sancti Probi*,

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[39]   K Barker, 'The early Christian topography of Sherborne', *Antiquity* 54 (1980) 229-
231, using topographical evidence of a D-shaped enclosure (potentially a *lann*),
had argued for a town site for *Lanprobi* which overlapped with the grounds of the
Saxon abbey. However, her approach is generally not supported. Hinton,
'Topography of Sherborne', 222-223, for example, stated that the size of Barker's
proposed enclosure was over three times that of analogous religious enclosures,
and that its identification primarily rests on an estate map of 1733. See also the
following who do not support Barker: Blair, 'Sherborne', 418; T A Hall, *Minster
Churches in the Dorset Landscape* (Oxford, 2000) 53; Keen, 'Topography of
Sherborne, Dorset', 132-134; Yorke, *Wessex*, 178. In a more recent work, Barker,
'Sherborne in Dorset', 5, allowed that 'the implication [is] that the castle mound
itself is *Lanprobi*. There is no evidence to the contrary, merely that at present the
topographical material from the town is more striking ...'. She remains a lone
voice in championing the town site.

[40]   P Rahtz, 'Pagans and Christians by the Severn Sea' 3-37 in L Abrams and J P
Carley (eds), *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey* (Woodbridge,
1991) at p 33; Snyder, *Age of Tyrants*, 178-9, 202-8.

[41]   The name Probus was included as 'Saint Mellanus Probus, Bishop and Confessor',
in Nicholas Roscarrock's *Lives of the Saints: Cornwall and Devon*, written in the
1610s, as 'perhaps' being the patron of Probus Church in Cornwall. But no further
information was included. See *Nicholas Roscarrock's Lives of the Saints:
Cornwall and Devon* ed N Orme (Exeter, 1992) 88, 152-3.

[42]   This list is contained in the *Vatican codex Reginensis Latinus 191*. See B L Olson
and O J Padel, 'A tenth-century list of Cornish parochial saints', *Cambridge
Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986) 33-71. The list contains 48 Brittonic or
plausibly Brittonic names, of which 21 are certainly those of patron saints of
Cornish churches, and a further 12 are known to be figures associated with the
British Celtic world. Propus appears twenty-fourth on the list. The list was
transcribed on one of the three bifolia (folio ii) used as the binding for a collection
of ecclesiastical texts at the monastery of Saint Remi at Rheims, where the sheets
appear to have been used without consideration for their contents. The list is in
Insular minuscule, dated to c 900 at the earliest, though it may have been written
later in the tenth century, possibly by a Breton scribe who had returned from a
sojourn in Britain, or by a Cornish scribe living in Brittany.

vernacular *Lanrabois/Lanbrebois* – now simply called Probus.[43] The vernacular forms in *Domesday* are what one would expect given the process of lenition, whereby 'p' would change to 'b' after *lann*.[44] In this regard, the 'p' in *Lanprobi*, as transcribed in the Cottonian list, is somewhat surprising. Indeed, the name *Lanprobi* itself is an odd combination of elements, that almost looks as though the Cornish *lann* has been combined with the Latin genitive of Probus. This in turn raises questions as to whether the name Probus in this particular case refers to a Latin or a Celtic figure. It is declined in Latin references as a Latin name, and indeed, there were non-Celtic saints called Probus.[45] However, it is also the case that when Latin names were adapted into Brittonic, the case-endings were dropped.[46] So *Lanprobi* is not consistent in form with other *lann*-names that contain a non-Celtic saint – such as *Llanhernin* (St Iserninus), *Llanfair* (St Mary), and *Llanfihangel* (St Michael) – which do not decline the name.[47] But if Probus *was* Celtic, it is then curious that the Cottonian scribe did not use a form similar to the *Lanrabois/Lanbrebois* in *Domesday Book*, which would clearly indicate a Celtic provenance for the name.[48] It becomes a distinct possibility that *Lanprobi* is a corrupted form of the original name, which might have been either Latin or Brittonic, or which might have been erroneously given a Latin genitive case-ending by the Cottonian scribe.

Accordingly, the identification of *Lanprobi* as the name of a possible pre-Saxon British monastery rests almost entirely on the *lann*-element. The use of this element to name British Christian sites can only have occurred in the south-west prior to the replacement of British speech with Old English, and only until such a time as there were indeed new sites

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[43] Barker, 'Early history of Sherborne', 78; Olson, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall*, 88; Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 83. There are further references to *Lanbrobes* in 1302; *Seynt Probus*, 1466; *Lambrobus*, c 1500 and 1621. See Olson and Padel, 'Cornish parochial saints', 51-52; Padel, 'Cornish names of Parish churches', 17.

[44] Lenition is where the initial letters of words are changed by what precedes them in Celtic languages. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me this linguistic process.

[45] For example, two bishops of Ravenna were called Probus (the first in the third or fourth century; the second in the fifth century), as was a monk of Agaune (early sixth century). See Bollandists (ed), *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina, 2 Vols* (Brussels, 1898-1901; *Novum Supplementum*, ed H Fros, 1986) 6944-6946. Note also Probus of Verona, *Acta Sanctorum*, I (1-15), 357.

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If we examine the charter itself from which the name derives, its authenticity is difficult to establish. Heather Edwards quite reasonably states that an eleventh-century list of charters, the majority of which have been lost in the original, might include a proportion of fabrications or interpolations.[50] Mary O'Donovan similarly questions the veracity of a reference that is not recorded until such a late date.[51] Nonetheless, it can be argued that many of the early charters in the Cottonian list may be genuine. For instance, it is unlikely that there would have been any motivation in the eleventh century to fabricate charters for estates outside of Dorset, given that after the division of the diocese c 909, Sherborne's endowment was probably restricted to lands within Dorset.[52] Thus, grants recorded in the Cottonian list of lands in Cornwall, Devon, Wiltshire and Somerset are not likely to have been fabricated as there would have been little reason for doing this. Other charters on the Cottonian list are associated with vague place-names or describe grants in vague terms often in relation to nearby rivers, such that estates cannot be matched with those recorded later. On general grounds, this feature is characteristic of authentic early West Saxon charters and not of forgeries. Thus, the list itself is unlikely to have been a complete fabrication.

Moreover, the fact that *Lanprobi* contains a British place-name element also indicates that the grant may be genuine. This is more likely to have occurred in an authentic charter than in a later forgery,[53] as a British name for an estate would certainly carry less weight in an English charter, especially if it could not be matched with a contemporary estate name.

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50   Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 243, 250-252.

51   O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 87. She also notes (xxi, 84) that there is no mention of *Lanprobi* in the version of the list of benefactors preserved in the *Sherborne Missal* of c 1396-1407.

52   Barker, 'Early history of Sherborne', 78; Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 250-252.

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Thus, *Lanprobi* would have been a doubtful choice by a forger.[54] Heather Edwards actually considers the *Lanprobi* charter to be the foundation charter of the Saxon monastery, the original of which was perhaps discarded at some later point, possibly because the monks could no longer identify the estate.[55] It might indeed be more than coincidence that Cenwalh, the name of the donor, is one of the West Saxon names that contains the *wealh-* element. It is rather apt having a king called the 'bold Briton' donating an estate described with a British name.

But there is no escaping the problem that the record of the charter is very distant from the seventh century. This need not invalidate it as a source of evidence, but it nevertheless reveals nothing of what the name or putative monastery of *Lanprobi* might have represented. If there was a British Celtic monastery near Sherborne, it is simply impossible to know of its condition at the time the Saxon monastery was established. *Lanprobi* may have been a thriving community, from which land may have been appropriated by the West Saxon church,[56] or it may have been an abandoned hill-top site that was remembered amongst the local population as having been sanctified at some earlier time.[57] The fact that a chapel dedicated to St Probus is documented in the twelfth century may indicate that a tradition of *Lanprobi* enjoyed some continuity, not having been entirely suppressed by the West Saxons; the similarity in the names is indeed striking.[58] But it is also possible that the veneration of Probus was

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[54]   This measure of authenticity is compromised to a certain extent by the fact that Cenwalh is the benefactor. His name is attached to several forged charters, from Sherborne, Glastonbury and Winchester (Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 20-23, 131-132, 240-241) and thus his reputation is, by association, somewhat tainted. It is conceivable, nevertheless, that his name was used in these forgeries because he was *remembered* as a monastic founder, although this point should not be pressed too far (Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 110). Indeed, Cenwalh was listed first in the *Sherborne Missal* medallions as a patron of Sherborne. See O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, xliv.

[55]   Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 251.

[56]   As suggested by Hall, *Minster Churches in the Dorset Landscape*, 11. She also posits that this may have been the reason for the choice of Sherborne as Aldhelm's see, namely, that there was estate land to be had.

[57]   Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 253, states that the site may have consisted only of 'derelict buildings'. See also Keen, 'Topography of Sherborne, Dorset', 134.

[58]   Hinton, 'Topography of Sherborne', 223. O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 88, raises the question of why someone would bother to forge a charter of privileges to Sherborne from Cenwalh (see Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 240-241), if there really was a genuine grant of land from the king as embodied in the *Lanprobi* charter: 'could the link between the British Lanprobi and the Saxon Sherborne foundation have been forgotten by the eleventh and twelfth centuries?'

introduced into Dorset from Cornwall in the tenth century or later,[59] though the *lann-* element does imply an earlier, rather than later, date.

If the presumption is accepted that Probus was venerated in some form in the vicinity of Sherborne, it must also be with the understanding that the site of this British community of *Lanprobi* was not that of the subsequent Saxon abbey. The extent of any 'continuity' under such conditions is, therefore, open to debate. There is little question, when Aldhelm assumed the bishopric in 705, that there was an existing foundation at Sherborne; otherwise, it is unlikely that it would have been considered a suitable location for his see.[60] Cenwalh's push as far as the River Parrett, recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 658, meant that he probably came into possession of territory in western Dorset, and so he may have chosen to establish a West Saxon community there to minister to the region. But unless one is prepared to accept the possibility of a multi-focal ecclesiastical centre – with Britons on the castle hill and West Saxons in the valley – it appears that the Saxon monastery itself was a new foundation, built on a new site, and accordingly was described with the English stream-name Sherborne.[61]

The case of Sherborne and *Lanprobi* thus provides a good demonstration of some of the problems associated with trying to establish British Christian continuity in Anglo-Saxon England. The evidence is indeed tantalising, but it is ambiguous; in the case of the *Lanprobi* charter, very late, and there is no way of knowing what the name *Lanprobi* would actually have represented on the ground. For the field of continuity studies to advance, there needs to be more specificity in the literature concerning what the term means and what degree of continuity is being investigated in any particular instance. The continued use of a Christian site or the late survival of a dedication, while being more than just 'background noise',[62] may have multiple interpretations, and this needs to be appreciated. Henry Loyn, writing in 1962, stated that 'There is a need ... to guard against a modern tendency to look for Celts under every stone'.[63] For the scholar

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[59] Kings such as Æthelstan, as well as many in the later Norman nobility, maintained an interest in saints and their relics, and monasteries dedicated to Cornish, Welsh and Breton saints were established from the tenth century in Devon, Somerset and Dorset. In c 933, for example, Æthelstan founded the monastery at Milton Abbas in Dorset, dedicated to the saints Michael, Mary, Branwalader and Samson. See Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 124-126.

[60] O'Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 87.

[61] Sherborne translates as 'bright stream' (*ASC* 860, *Scireburnan*). See E Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names, 4th Edition* (Oxford, 1984) 416.

[62] Blair, 'Churches in the early English landscape', 9.

[63] H R Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962) 12.

attempting to demonstrate British Christian continuity in Anglo-Saxon England, this is a warning that is as pertinent today as it was then.