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Julius and Aaron ‘Martyrs of Caerleon’: in search of Wales’ first Christians

By ANDY SEAMAN

. . . the site of the shrine of St Alban, near Caerleon, is practically unknown to students; and certainly for long centuries its importance has never been realized.
(Wade-Evans 1910, 76)

INTRODUCTION

In the ‘history’ section of the *De Excidio Britanniae* Gildas named three British martyrs, Alban of Verulam and Aaron and Julius of the ‘city of the legions’, whose cults were active at the time he was writing.¹ The story of Alban’s martyrdom is given in the *Passio S. Albani*, versions of which Gildas and later Bede² (Sharpe 2001, 30–1; 2002, 114–7). In the late eleventh century William of St Albans wrote a *Life of St Alban and his companion St Amphibalus* (Levison 1941, 337, 354), and over the course of the Middle Ages Alban came to be recognised as ‘England’s protomartyr’ (Hayward 2005). Of Julius and Aaron, however, our only early evidence comes from Gildas himself, and although they were briefly mentioned in a small number of sources their cult remained relatively obscure throughout the Middle Ages. Despite this, however, Julius and Aaron is not of insignificance to the history of Britain, and they have long been noted by scholars, albeit with differing levels of scepticism concerning their historicity (see, for example, Innys 1747, 1; Rees 1836, 96; Haverfield 1896, 419, n. 4; Zimmer 1902, 3; Lloyd 1911, vol. 2, 103; Williams 1912, 105; Thomas 1981, 48–50; Fleming 2010, 122). They have generally escaped detailed consideration, however (some notable exceptions being: Levison 1941; Stephenson 1985; Boon 1992; Knight 2001; 2013, Sharpe 2002), and as such this article will attempt to provide an as comprehensive account of their cult as is possible within the confines of the available evidence.

I will begin by trying to restore to Aaron and Julius something of their Late Antique historical context. It is argued that Gildas knew little about Julius and Aaron, and it is likely that details of their lives and martyrdom were never written down. We have no reason to doubt the reality of their cult, at least in the sixth century, but its origins remain obscure and continuity between the third and sixth centuries cannot be proven. The traditional identification of the location of their cult, which Gildas described as the ‘City of the Legions’, with Caerleon Roman fortress is affirmed. But whilst some tentative suggestions as to whom Julius and Aaron may have been can be proposed, the date of their martyrdom and their historical reality as Christian martyrs remains unknowable. I will then move on to explore the history of the cult of Julius and Aaron between the sixth and the nineteenth centuries. It is argued that by the ninth century a church dedicated to Julius and Aaron was located on a hill to the south of the river Usk overlooking Caerleon. This church was most likely the successor to the martyrium which Gildas knew of in the sixth century, and it appears have remained in existence until the Reformation, though the relics of Julius and Aaron may have been moved to nearby Holy Trinity church shortly after the Norman Conquest. By the end of the fifteenth century Julius and Aaron appear to have been largely forgotten, but in the generations following the Reformation, as both Protestants and Catholics looked to the early history of British Christianity for legitimation, the tradition was reinvented, albeit now divorced from the location of their original martyrium. Some vestige of the original cult may have survived at Holy Trinity church, however, where as late as the early nineteenth century people still visited a tombstone, still known today as the ‘healing stone’, which was thought to ‘cover the mortal remains of a reputed saint or saints’ (Wakeman 1847, 85).

BRITAIN’S OTHER MARTYRS

No saints’ lives survive for Julius and Aaron,³ and they are notably absent from the collection of lives in the Book of Llandaf which elsewhere includes a brief note of their martyrdom and a charter granting the territorium sanctorum martirum iulij et aaron.⁴ Bede briefly mentions Julius and Aaron in book one of the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*,⁵ and they are included in a tenth-century Welsh genealogical collection,⁶ but these references are drawn from Gildas and offer no independent information. The names ‘Aaron’ and ‘Ilius’ are included alongside St Patrick and St Brigit among the invocations of saints in the margins of

St Gallen, MS 904,⁷ a heavily glossed copy of Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticae*. This work appears to have been made by Irish scholars from Leinster passing through Wales on their way to the Continent in about the middle of the ninth century. The reference provides important evidence for the continuity of their cult, but unfortunately provides no information on the saints themselves (Dumville 1997, 23–8). The twelfth- and thirteenth-century references by Geoffrey of Monmouth⁸ and Gerald of Wales⁹ are also informative about later attitudes, but must be discounted as sources for the Late Antique period.

An examination of Julius and Aaron in their Late Antique context must, therefore, begin and end with the *De Excidio Britanniae*. The date of the *De Excidio* is contested, but it is conventionally dated to c. 530/40, although some authors favour a date in the late fifth century (Wood 1984; Lapidge 1984; Charles-Edwards 2013, 215–8). Gildas described the *De Excidio* as a *historia* but it was not a work of history in the modern sense of the term. It was an extended prophetic sermon targeted at the secular and ecclesiastical leaders of Gildas' own time, and we must remember that the history section that concerns us here, which makes up only about an eighth of the entire work, was intended as a preliminary to this main focus (Charles-Edwards 2013, 202–4). In chapters 8 to 12 Gildas recounted the history of Christianity amongst the British, central to which was an account of Diocletian's Great Persecution. Richard Sharpe has demonstrated that this section drew heavily upon Eusebius' general account of the Great Persecution in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* which was known to Gildas through Rufinus's Latin translation (Sharpe 2002, 109–11). But in chapter 10 Gildas named three British martyrs:

God therefore increased his pity for us: for he wishes all men to be saved, and calls sinners no less than those think themselves just. As a free gift to us, in the time (as I conjecture) of the same persecution, he acted to save Britain being plunged deep in the thick darkness of black night; for he lit for us the brilliant lamps of holy martyrs. Their graves and the places where they suffered would now have the greatest effect in instilling the blaze of divine charity in the minds of beholders, were it not that our citizens, thanks to our sins, have been deprived of many of them by the unhappy partition with the barbarians. I refer to St Alban of Verulam, Aaron and Julius, citizens of the city of the legions,¹⁰ and the others of both sexes who, in different places, displayed the highest spirit in the battle-line of Christ.

The inclusion of Alban, Aaron and Julius demonstrates that Gildas had access to other sources of information, and in chapter 11 he gives an account of Alban's martyrdom which must derive from an early, probably mid-fifth-century, version of the *Passio S. Albani* (Sharpe 2001, 31). He then, however, returns to a general narrative drawn from Rufinus, and although Julius and Aaron must have been well known to Gildas and his audience, beyond identifying them as 'citizens of the City of the legions' and 'conjecturing' that they were martyred during the Great Persecution he offers no additional information. Given the details which Gildas counts on Alban, we may assume that had he known anything more about Julius and Aaron he would have included it. Some have suggested that this paucity of information must cast their historicity into doubt (Applebaum 1951–52, 199; Haverfield 1896, 419; Plummer 1896, 20). It is certainly the case that we cannot prove whether Julius and Aaron ever existed or if they were invented at some subsequent stage, but this is also true of the majority of martyrs even those whose acts were written down. Most acts were products of a post-Constantinian Church that was seeking to appropriate and harness the power of its holy dead, and the extent to which they could represent remembered, reworked, or invented traditions is debated (Grig 2004, 2–3; Sághy 2010, 18–20; 2011, 2–6). There were, of course, many genuine martyrs in the Late Antique world, but in addition there was a host of forgotten martyrs, fake martyrs, unknown martyrs, and rediscovered martyrs whose historicity we cannot recover. The story of Alban's martyrdom was given in the *Passio S. Albani*,¹¹ but whilst that of Julius and Aaron, like many others, was not, this should not detract from the reality of their cult at least at the time that Gildas was writing, and almost certainly some period before. There is, however, no evidence with which to prove continuity from as early as the persecutions of the third century, and we must allow for the possibility that Julius and Aaron, and indeed Alban, were essentially mythical (Henig 2001, 25). The veneration of a martyr whose life was unknown is not without parallel in post-Roman Britain. Around 601 Augustine came across the cult of a martyr called Sixtus in either Kent or Essex. None of the elders whom Augustine encountered knew the story of his martyrdom, and Augustine, assuming the saint to have been the martyred Pope Sixtus II (d. 258), wrote to Gregory the Great requesting true relics of Sixtus from Rome. In actual fact Augustine had most probably come across the cult of an otherwise unknown British martyr which had survived within local tradition since the fourth century; texts were not therefore essential for the survival of a cult (Brooks 1984, 20; Sharpe 2002, 124).

LOCATION OF LEGIONUM URBIS

Gildas identifies Julius and Aaron as ‘citizens of the city of the legions’ (*Legionum urbis civis*). He does not say that they were martyred here, but there would have been no reason to mention the locality if it was not the place of the cult (as was the case with Alban at Verulamium; Sharpe 2002, 119). In his translation of the *De Excidio* Michael Winterbottom (1978, 19), following Hugh Williams (1899, 27), identified *Legionum urbis* as Caerleon, the site of the legionary fortress of the Second Augustan Legion in Monmouthshire. The Welsh place-name Caerleon is usually interpreted as deriving from the Old Welsh *cair* (‘fort’) and *llion* (from the Latin *legionum* ‘of the legions’) meaning ‘Fortress of the Legions’ (Owen and Morgan 2007, 64), but since *urbs* was not used in spoken Latin, Gildas must have used it as a substitute for another word, which could have been *cair* or *castra* (Rivet and Smith 1979, 378–9). Whilst the majority of scholars are content with identifying *Legionum urbis* as Caerleon, a significant minority, including Ken Dark (2006, 2), John Field (1999), Guy Halsall (2013, 188), David Dumville (1984, 82) and Keith Fitz Patrick Mathews (2003, 13), have proposed alternative locations, including Chester, Carlisle, York, Colchester, and Lincoln. Several factors are cited in favour of this; firstly, the Roman name for the legionary fortress at Caerleon was *Isca*, whilst the description *Legionum urbis* could refer to any of Britain’s legionary fortresses. Indeed, Bede’s spelling of Chester was *Carlegion* and the Old Welsh spelling was *Caer Lleon*, and so a derivation from *Legionum urbis* is also possible (Rivet and Smith 1979, 337; Smith 1979, 6–7). Secondly, since Gildas states that the Britons were unable to access the graves of their martyrs because of the ‘unhappy partition with the barbarians’,¹² it has been argued that the graves of Julius, Aaron and Alban must have been located in a part of Britain which was under Anglo-Saxon control in the early sixth century, which, on the basis of the distribution of Anglo-Saxon burials, must have been in eastern England.

Each of these points can be refuted to a greater or lesser extent, however. The official Roman name for Caerleon was *Isca*, but *Castra Legion(is)* could have been an alternative name, and whilst *Legionum urbis* could refer to any of Britain’s Roman legionary fortresses, it is the case that only Caerleon and Chester are referred to in this way in medieval sources (Smith and Rivet 1979, 378). Secondly, Patrick Sims-Williams has noted that whilst ‘the unhappy partition with the barbarians’ implies that there were areas of Britain where Britons could not go, Gildas does not explicitly state that the graves of Alban, Julius and Aaron were in those areas. Thus he suggests that Gildas may have included them as notable, rather

than inaccessible martyrs (Sims-Williams 1983, 27). Moreover, Michael Garcia has recently argued that the ‘unhappy partition with the barbarians’ referred not to a geographical boundary at all, but rather to the breaking of the treaty between the Britons and Saxons mentioned in chapter 23 of *De Excidio* (Garcia 2013). Thus we do not need to assume that *Legionum urbis* was in eastern England.

The two strongest candidates for *Legionum urbis* are therefore Chester and Caerleon, but as Welsh scholars have long been aware the weight of the evidence falls in favour of Caerleon, where from at least the mid-ninth century there was a church dedicated to Julius and Aaron (Boon 1992; 125; Williams 1899, 27). The key piece of evidence here is a charter in the Book of Llandaf which records a grant of a church called the Merthir Iun et Aaron.¹³ There is no reason to doubt that the charter reflects a genuine grant, and on the basis of a boundary clause attached to the charter the church must have been located adjacent to Caerleon on the south side of the river Usk (Coe 2001, 590–2; Davies 1979, 121). Below, I will argue that there are strong grounds for identifying this as the successor to the martyrdom which Gildas was referring to in the *De Excidio*.

JULIUS AND AARON

Given the sparseness and uncertainties of the evidence we should not speculate too much over the details of Julius and Aaron’s martyrdom, if indeed it happened at all. We can, however, make some informed suggestions. Gildas describes Julius and Aaron as ‘citizens of Caerleon’, but most commentators have identified them as soldiers. Thus, George Boon drew an analogy with the centurion Marcellus of Tangier who was executed after throwing down his military belt and insignia as an act of formal disobedience during a pagan military parade (Musurillo 1972, 249–59; Boon 1992, 12). Gildas’ use of the term *cives* (citizens) could suggest that Julius and Aaron were civilians rather than soldiers, however, perhaps occupants of one of Caerleon’s extra-mural *vici* or even a wider *territorium* centred on the fortress. Indeed, the Hebrew name Aaron could suggest a Jewish convert who would have been exempt from military service. Alternatively, George Boon, noting that Aaron was an extremely rare name in either Jewish or Christian contexts, followed Innys (1747, 1) in suggesting that it may not have been original. He proposed that the Old Testament name Aaron, that of the first high priest of Israel and the elder brother of Moses, may have been substituted for an unwanted pagan name at the time of conversion (Boon 1992, 13). Eusebius

and other writers record this practice amongst persecuted Christians, and John Davies has suggested that this tradition could have been carried into the early Middle Ages (Davies 2012, 14–5). Julius was a common name among soldiers, however,¹⁴ both because of family descent and because of the practice of enlisting men adopting the name of one of Rome's greatest military commanders.

Under Roman law opportunities for martyrdom were limited, and only provincial governors or the emperor himself had the power to try the capital cases that could have resulted in execution and martyrdom (de Ste Croix 1963, 113). Such capital cases were heard at assize courts (*conuentus*) held at the larger towns throughout the provinces. Julius and Aaron could, therefore, have been tried at Cirencester the provincial capital of *Britannia Prima* or *Caerwent* the *civitas* capital of the Silures, which lies only twelve kilometres to the east of *Caerleon* (Stephens 1985). Whilst Julius and Aaron need not have been executed at the same time, the paring of their names could imply contemporaneity. We have no reliable evidence to indicate when this may have been, however. Gildas 'conjectured' that their martyrdoms had taken place during Diocletian's Great Persecution of 303–11, but this was surmised from Eusebius' general account of the Great Persecution, and he must have overlooked the fact that the Eusebius also stated that Diocletian's caesar in the Western Empire, Constantius I, took little direct action against Christians (Boon 1992, 13–4; Sharpe 2002, 110–3).¹⁵ John Morris, citing material in the T Text of the *Passio S. Albani*, proposed that Alban must have been martyred in 209 during the reign of Septimius Severus (Morris 1968), but since his argument was based on late interpolations which are absent from the earlier E Text this date must be discounted (Sharpe 2001, 34–5). Archaeological evidence, including an inscription of the joint reign of Valerian and Gallienus¹⁶ indicates that *Caerleon* was occupied during the general persecutions of Decius (249–251) and Valerian (257–259), but we also know that persecution occurred sporadically as a product of local conditions regardless of who the emperor might have been (Castelli 1997, 37; de Ste Croix 1963, 107, 113, 121–2). George Boon suggested that Julius and Aaron must have been martyred prior to c. 290 when the fortress was abandoned by the legion, but since occupation is now known to have continued into and throughout the fourth century, this too must be discounted (Boon 1992, 12; Evans 2010, 166–7). Thus we must conclude that we simply do not know when or indeed if Julius and Aaron were martyred. By concentrating on these details, however, we are misconstruing the significance of Julius and Aaron for the history of western Britain. The cult of martyrs spread widely in the fourth and fifth centuries, and was fundamental to the Christianization of the empire and the subsequent development of local saints' cults (Grig

2004; Sharpe 2002, 109). That south-east Wales should have two martyrs should not come as a surprise, this was the most Romanized part of Wales more akin to western England than most of Wales, and we have no reason to assume that during the fourth century it was not moving along the same path to Christianization as other parts of the Empire, although the fifth century saw it move dramatically away from this trajectory (Seaman 2014). Thus whatever their historicity as genuine martyrs, Julius and Aaron remind us that in the fourth century south-east Wales was part of a Late Antique world which spanned much of Europe.

THE MARTYRIUM OF JULIUS AND AARON

It is very unlikely that Gildas would have identified Julius and Aaron as citizens of Caerleon if this had not been the location of their cult, and his reference to ‘their graves and the places where they suffered’ implies that this was as a primary cult site. Gildas assumed that his audience was familiar with Julius and Aaron, and their cult, most probably centred on a martyrdom, must have been receiving religious devotion in the sixth century. Indeed, the cult had probably been established for some time; St Alban’s shrine on the hill above Verulamium appears to have been a focus of activity by 429 when it was visited by Germanus of Auxerre (although Verulamium is not explicitly named in the text), if not by the late fourth century (Higham 2014, 126),¹⁷ and the same could have been true of that of Julius and Aaron at Caerleon. The cults of Gildas’ martyrs took very different trajectories over the course of the Middle Ages, however; Alban became one of England’s most prominent saints and the impressive abbey at St Albans stands as testament to this. Julius and Aaron, however, remained relatively obscure, and the only standing monument to them, the small Anglican church dedicated to SS Julius and Aaron which now stands short distance from Caerleon, was established in 1926 (Ellis 1975).

Nevertheless, a successor to the martyrdom which Gildas knew of in the sixth century appears to have existed at least as late as 1495, albeit on a very different scale to the impressive abbey at St Albans. A mid-ninth-century charter in the Book of Llandaf¹⁸ provides a crucial link between the early and later evidence (Knight 2001, 40). Charter 225 records the grant of the *territorium sanctorum martirum iulij et aaron* (territorium of the martyrs Julius and Aaron) by the brothers Wulferth, Hegoi and Arwystl, to Bishop Nudd. The charter states that the *territorium* had previously belonged to Bishop Dyfrig, and a brief narration recounts how the property, which consisted of a church and associated estate, was given to Nudd in

reparation for a conflict between the brothers and the bishop's familia (Davies 1979, 181). The Book of Llandaf was compiled between 1119 and 1134 under the influence of Urban, the first bishop of Llandaff appointed under Norman rule, who was at the time of the book's compilation pursuing a series of disputes over diocesan boundaries and episcopal properties with the bishops of Hereford and St David's (Davies 1998). The charters were compiled as part of Urban's legal campaign and are known to be fraudulent within this twelfth-century context (Davies 1979). Nevertheless, Wendy Davies has demonstrated, through careful examination of the charter formulae and witness lists, that there are a considerable number of original records, lying behind layers of later editing and interpolation, which are likely to have been contemporary with the events they describe (Davies 1979; Sims-Williams 1982; Charles-Edwards 2013, 267). The narration to charter 225 contains standard interpolations and plot-tokens and is unlikely to be genuine, and the reference to property formerly belonging to Dyfrig is similarly dubious. But once these later additions are removed what remains is an 'otherwise unquestionable account' of a genuine grant, which on the basis of its witness list can be dated to the mid-ninth century (Davies 1979, 121).¹⁹

The boundary clause attached to the charter locates the territorium on the south side of the river Usk immediately adjacent to Caerleon (Coe 2001, 477, 590–2, 624–5; see below for discussion of the location of the church). In the twelfth-century rubric the church is named as the Merthir Iun et Aaron. The place-name element merthyr belongs to an early phase of British Christian nomenclature. It derives from the Latin plural martyres meaning 'relics', and came to mean 'a church or cemetery, holding the physical remains of a named saint or martyr' (Sharpe 2002, 142–3; Pearce 2004, 139). The name itself does not prove a connection with a primary cult site, but the likely location of the church on Chepstow Hill overlooking Caerleon on the edge of one its major cemeteries is typical of Late Antique martyria on the Continent (Knight 2001; 2013, 24; see Figs 1 and 2).

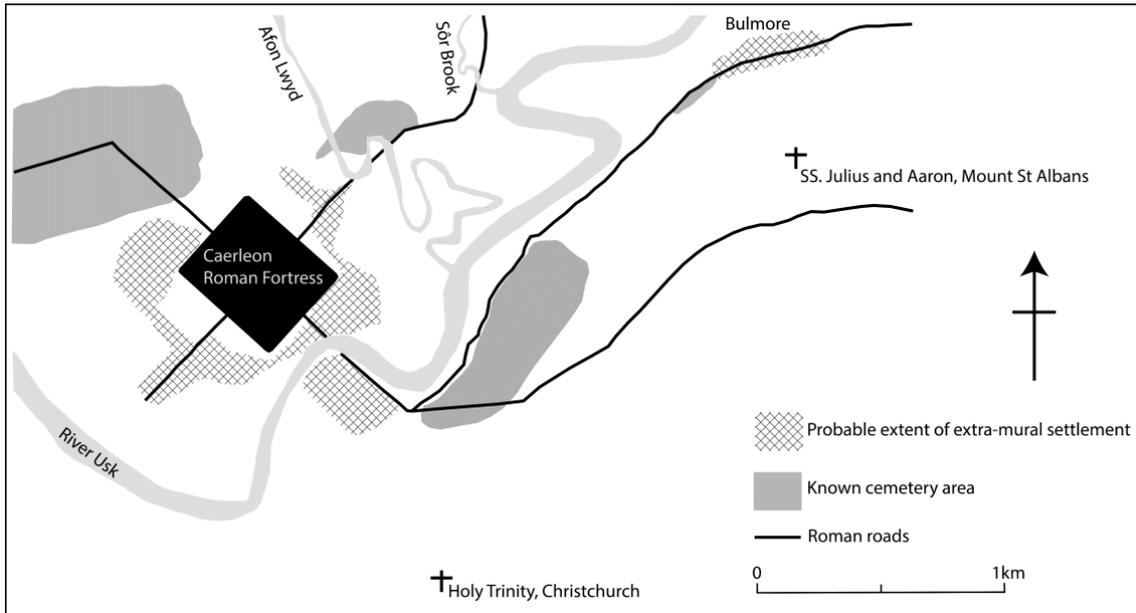


Fig. 1. Map of Caerleon showing the probable location of the church of SS Julius and Aaron and Holy Trinity church (after Evans 2010, fig. 7.1 with additions).



Fig. 2. Caerleon as seen from the probable location of the martyrrium of Julius and Aaron at Mount St Albans. Photograph by author.

This church is later referred to in a charter created at Bec in Normandy after the middle of the twelfth century. The grant records how Robert Chandos, an Anglo-Norman lord, gave a church at Goldcliff, nine kilometres south of Caerleon on the edge of the Severn Estuary, to the monastery of Bec for the foundation of a priory. Included in the property which Chandos bestowed upon the priory were two churches: *ecclesiam sanctae Trinitatis iuxta Karlium* and *ecclesiam Iulii et Aron*.²⁰ The former can be identified as Holy Trinity church, the benefice of the parish of Christchurch,²¹ and the church of Julius and Aaron must be the same as the Merthyr Iun et Aaron of Llandaff charter 225.²² Both churches are later recorded in two confirmations of the Goldcliff grant; one of c. 1154–58 by Morgan ap Owain and his brother Iorwerth, and the other of 1204 by Archbishop Hubert Walter of Canterbury. The final reference to the church of Julius and Aaron is in a deed of 1495,²³ but now it is named the *ecclesie Sancti Albon* (the church of St Alban) (Bradney 1932, 205). Whilst this change of dedication has been seen by some as evidence of an entirely separate church (Wade-Evans 1910, 75–8; Evans 2004, 114, n. 11), a link with the original is established in an 1143 confirmation of the Goldcliff grant in which the church is named *ecclesiam sanctorum Iulii et Aron atque Albani* (the church of Julius, Aaron, and Alban). This triplet occurs again in 1201 in a confirmation by King John (Levison 1941, 341–2).²⁴

The patronage of the church must have changed from Julius and Aaron in the ninth century, to Julius, Aaron, and Alban by 1143, and finally to just Alban in 1495. Such a phenomenon is not unusual and could be explained in a number of ways (Jones 2007, 41–4). Wilhelm Levison suggested that during the early twelfth century monks at Goldcliff added relics of Alban, whose fame was increasing at this time, to those of the relatively obscure and poorly authenticated Julius and Aaron (Levison 1941, 342). This is in line with Norman attitudes to obscure and unfamiliar Welsh saints who were frequently demoted, replaced or, where a cult was too strong to be repressed, supplemented by saints drawn from the international calendar (Davies 1987, 181–2). Relics of St Alban were recorded in the relic collections of churches in various parts of Britain (Thomas 1974, 359), but Levison suggested that a link could have come through Bec, the mother-house of Goldcliff, via Abbot Paul (1077–93) of St Albans (Hertfordshire) who was a nephew of Lanfranc of Canterbury, formerly an abbot of Bec. He notes that translation could have taken place when Alban's shrine was opened in 1129 (Levison 1941, 343). Tristan Gray Hulse, however, has drawn attention to the fact that the addition of Alban to the dedication occurred a short time before the story of Alban was linked to Caerleon through Amphibalus (a resident of Caerleon and the priest whom Alban's shielded from capture) in William of St Albans *Life of St Alban* and

St Amphibalus (written c. 1167–77) and later Gerald of Wales' *Journey Through Wales* (written c. 1193). Thus, he has suggested that there may have been a growing tradition linking Alban with Caerleon in the twelfth century, and a transference of relics may not have been necessary to explain the appearance of Alban within the dedication (Gray Hulse in litt. 2009).

Indeed, it is possible that by the end of the eleventh century the relics of Julius and Aaron had actually been removed from their martyrrium to Holy Trinity church (one of the other churches granted to Goldcliff) to which the original martyrrium may have then become a chapel. The evidence for this is slight, but not unconvincing. Firstly, the absence of a church of Julius and Aaron and/or Alban from the lists of benefices given in the *Valuation of Norwich of 1254* (Lunt 1926) and *Taxatio Nicholai of 1291*²⁵ implies that it was not a full benefice by the mid-thirteenth century. Whilst these sources do not provide fully comprehensive lists of benefices, the text of the *Taxatio* in British Library MS Cotton Vitellius C x, fos 115^r–118^r is especially detailed and also includes benefices valued at six marks and under (Denton and Taylor 1998, 135–6). Secondly, there is a persuasive case for locating the martyrrium of Julius and Aaron within the same medieval parish as Holy Trinity church (see below). Thirdly, the presence of relics of Julius and Aaron in lists from the Benedictine houses of New Minster at Winchester and Leominster suggests that their relics had been elevated by the time that Holy Trinity church was established under Norman patronage in the late eleventh century (Thomas 1974, 333).²⁶ Finally, somewhat opaque evidence for the transference of their cult is provided by the unusually high valuation assigned Holy Trinity church at the Reformation which included donations by pilgrims,²⁷ and the fact that an incubation cult survived there until the early nineteenth century (see below).

Regardless of the status of the church of Julius and Aaron and the means by which Alban came to be added to its dedication once he appeared he 'proved something of a cuckoo in the nest' and eventually supplanted Julius and Aaron to be left as the sole patron (Knight 2013, 27). The reason for Julius and Aaron slipping from the dedication is not known, but their relative obscurity when compared to Alban is likely to have been an important factor. The deed of 1495 is the latest reference to the church or chapel, and Jeremy Knight has suggested that it may have been suppressed during the reign of Edward VI (Knight 2013, 27), although its absence from the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (1535) may imply it was abandoned even before this, and a church dedicated to St Alban is noticeably absent from William Camden's description of Caerleon in the late sixteenth century.

Where then was the church of Julius and Aaron (and later Alban) located?²⁸ In 1798 William Coxe stated that a chapel dedicated to St Alban had stood at a place called Mount St Albans ‘on an eminence to the east of Caerleon, overlooking the Usk’ (Coxe 1801, 95).²⁹ There is no reason to doubt that this is not the same church or chapel recorded in 1495, and therefore the successor to the original martyrium of Julius and Aaron. Mount St Albans lies on Chepstow Hill, two kilometres north-west of Christchurch, but within the same medieval parish (indeed the parish boundary as it is recorded in the nineteenth century appears to kink around Mount St Albans so as to deliberately include it), and also within the bounds of the territorium sanctorum martirum iulij et aaron as far as these can be reconstructed. Thus the topographic setting is in keeping with the charter evidence. The place-name ‘Mount St Albans’ is first attested in a will of 1624 (Bradney 1932, 305), but it is more than just the location and place-name which suggests there was a church here from an early date. A lease of 1728 records the field-name *Cae’r Fynwent* (‘field of the graveyard’) (Bradney 1932, 306), and later William Coxe noted that ‘an adjoining piece of land [to the church] is still called the Chapel Yard today’ (Coxe 1801, 95). It is surely not a coincidence that Coxe also noted that in 1785 ‘several stone coffins were discovered in digging foundations of a new house’ on Mount St Albans (Coxe 1801, 95). This must be a reference to the discovery of cist burials— a form of burial practice known to have been associated with early medieval churches in western Britain (James 1992). Jeremy Knight has also drawn attention to a tenth or early eleventh century sculptured cross slab that was presented to Caerleon Museum shortly before 1862 by the owner of Bulmore Farm (which is less than 500 metres from Mount St Albans). The Bulmore cross is one of a small group of early medieval cross-slabs from Monmouthshire, but whilst it has no exact provenance all of the other examples can be shown to have been associated with important early medieval churches, and so it would be surprising if this were not the case here. Given Bulmore’s proximity to Mount St Albans this is the likely candidate for such a church (Knight 2001, 40–1; Redknap and Lewis 2007, 505–8; 579–80).³⁰

Mount St Albans with its possible succession of churches from at least the sixth through to the late fifteenth or sixteenth century therefore has the potential to be of great archaeological and historical significance. The present author has instigated a programme of archaeological survey and excavation in the field which William Coxe thought the chapel was located in. Thus far fieldwork has been undertaken on a very modest scale, but medieval features, including a stone built drain and a section of east–west aligned dry-stone wall

associated with Roman and medieval pottery, have been identified (Seaman forthcoming). Funds are currently being sought for future more extensive fieldwork.

Julius and Aaron must have been well known when Gildas was writing in the sixth century, but the later references to them are vaguer, and by the twelfth century they appear to have been of only local significance, unlike their compatriot Alban who had come to be defined as ‘England’s protomartyr’ (Hayward 2005). The only other dedication to Julius and Aaron which I am aware of is the chapel at Llanharan in the parish of Llanilid (Glamorgan) (Baring-Gould and Fisher 1907, 103). This was a medieval foundation, but the dedication may have been prompted by an earlier one to an otherwise unknown saint Haran and so its significance is difficult to judge (Owen and Morgan 2007, 267). It was the confessors of the ‘Age of Saints’, such as David, and more locally Teilo and Cadog, who became the major saints of early medieval Wales, not its two Roman martyrs. Why this should have been the case is difficult to determine, but a lack of knowledge about Julius and Aaron, which appears to have been the case even in Gildas’ time, is likely to have been the crucial factor.

SEARCHING FOR THE CHURCHES OF JULIUS, AARON AND ALBAN

As we have seen, there only appears to have been one church dedicated to Julius and Aaron (and later also Alban) in the vicinity of Caerleon. By the late eighteenth century, however, antiquaries were firmly of the opinion that there had once been two or three separate churches or chapels, and this idea has persisted up to the present day (Coxe 1801, 95, 98; Wade-Evans 1910; Evans 2004, 114). The origins of this confusion lie in the twelfth century. In his fanciful tale of King Arthur’s Whitsuntide crown-wearing at Caerleon, Geoffrey of Monmouth (writing c. 1136) described how the city was ‘was famous for its two churches. One built in honour of the martyr Julius The second, founded in the name of the blessed Aaron’. In addition ‘the city also contained a college of two hundred learned men, who were skilled in astronomy and the other arts’.³¹ Geoffrey’s account was followed by Gerald of Wales (writing c. 1188) who wrote that in ‘former times’ Caerleon had three churches: one dedicated to Julius, one to Aaron, and the third ‘the metropolitan church for the whole of Wales’.³² Neither Geoffrey of Monmouth nor Gerald of Wales claimed that these churches were in existence in their own time, and there is no early evidence which suggests there were ever separate dedications to Julius, Aaron and Alban. Geoffrey and Gerald appear to have sown seeds which were propagated by a later generation, however; in 1616 Bishop Francis

Godwin wrote that separate churches dedicated to Julius and Aaron had previously been located about two miles apart on the east and west side of Caerleon, although again they were not in existence in his own time.³³ The church of St Julian was thought to have been located at St Julian's (the manor is thought to have taken its name from the church) in the parish of Christchurch (Ellis 1975). The earliest reference to a church here is in the 1607 edition of William Camden's *Britannia* which stated that the church of St Julian had stood on the site of the manor house of the Herbert family.³⁴ It should be noted, however, that this reference to the exact location of the church is missing from the earlier 1586 edition which merely followed Geoffrey of Monmouth in stating that Julius and Aaron both had a church within the city,³⁵ and it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the inclusion of the location of church followed Camden and Godwin's tour of Wales in 1590. Later writers placed St Aaron's chapel at Penrhos to the east of the Caerleon (Coxe 1801, 95). Sabine Baring-Gould and John Fisher located the chapel within the defences of a Civil War earthwork (which they mistook for a Roman camp) adjacent to Penrhos farm between the Afon Lwyd and Sôr Brook (Baring-Gould and Fisher 1907, 102; also followed by Bradney 1932, 201 and Ellis 1975),³⁶ whilst Octavius Morgan placed the church further to the south in a 'field near the copper-field' (Morgan 1882, iv).³⁷

Outside of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales there is no early evidence that separate churches dedicated St Julian or St Aaron existed, and it is noteworthy that these churches were already consigned to memory at the point when they are first mentioned, and it is only William Coxe writing in 1798 who refers to an extant chapel building at St Julian's and this perhaps most likely to have been a private chapel of the Herberts rather than an ancient foundation. Indeed, it is possible that the tradition of separate churches owes more to the religious convictions of the local gentry following the Reformation than any genuine historical basis. In the generations following the Reformation both Protestants and Catholics looked to the early history of the British church to affirm and legitimise their positions (Heal 2005, 596). Gildas was one of the medieval writers whom antiquaries, including Camden himself, drew into this debate,³⁸ but it was Geoffrey of Monmouth who was most influential (Curran 2002). The fullest exposition of the Protestant view of early British church history was given in the preface to the 1567 Welsh version of the New Testament by Richard Davies, bishop of St David's 1561–81 and William Salisbury, Wales' foremost Renaissance scholar of the time (Williams 1953, 226). The preface included an account of Diocletian's persecution, and later Aaron is identified as one of the 'chiefs of the land of Morgan [Glamorgan]'.³⁹ The Herberts who held St Julian's were strong Protestants, whilst the

Morgan's of Llantarnam who acquired Penrhos in 1600 were recusant Catholics. Before the Reformation these two gentry families had been connected by marriage, but they were now on opposite sides of a religious divide (Kennerley 1973; Knight 2005, 51). With the site of the original martyrdom forgotten or at least associated with St Alban, is it not possible that these families may have sought to bolster their positions by claiming that the churches of Caerleon's two ancient martyrs had once stood on their lands?

THE AFTERLIFE OF MARTYRS

The site of the original martyrdom of Julius and Aaron was preserved within the place-name Mount St Albans,⁴⁰ but as we have seen by the seventeenth century the martyrs were associated with two different sites. The presence of an incubation cult at Holy Trinity church in the hamlet of Christchurch hints at possibility of some form of continuity within the parish however.⁴¹ The cult focused on a tombstone commemorating a John Colmer and his wife Isabella which dates from 1376⁴² (see Fig. 3). As late as the early-nineteenth century it was believed that the stone was 'supposed to cover the mortal remains of a reputed saint or saints' and people would 'resort to it on the eve of the Trinity Sunday, and some other festivals, in the vain hope of being relieved from their infirmities, by reposing all night upon the tomb' (Wakeman 1847, 85–6). In 1770 'not less than sixteen were laid on' the stone (Strange 1779, 78), and in the first years of the nineteenth century Edward Donovan gave an account of a young man with a nightcap on lying upon the tombstone and praying for a cure whilst surrounded by a circle of onlookers (Donovan 1805, 173–5). In the middle of the eighteenth century a Squire Van of Llanwern had apparently tried to discourage the practice by ordering that the doors of the church be locked on the eve of the Trinity Thursday, but then relented when at midnight the bells of the church reputedly began to ring by themselves (Donovan 1805, 180–1). William Coxe also noted the tombstone and commented that 'the custom is gradually falling into disuse' (Coxe 1801, 59).

In relation to the tombstone itself 'there is no account, either historical or traditionary, respecting the parties here interred' (Wakeman 1847, 86), and there is certainly no evidence to suggest that John Colmer and/or his wife were of saintly status—they were most likely patrons of the church. The tombstone's position within the chancel, before the altar, is evocative of that of medieval shrines, however, and it may be more than coincidence that a tombstone depicting two individuals should become the focus of a cult in the same parish that

the martyrdom of Julius and Aaron had once stood. It is therefore possible that a tradition of the ‘mortal remains of a reputed saint or saints’ derived from a memory of Julius and Aaron? It is possible that their relics were transferred from their original martyrdom to Holy Trinity church in the late eleventh century—such practices were in keeping with Norman attitudes to the Welsh saints—and could explain the high value of Christchurch in the Valor Ecclesiasticus (which included money from pilgrims), and why the martyrdom was not of parochial status in later Middle Ages when it had evidently been an important church prior to the Conquest. The cult would have been officially suppressed at the Reformation but remarkably, although not uniquely,⁴³ its last vestiges may have survived into the early nineteenth century.



Fig. 3. The ‘healing stone’ at Christchurch near Caerleon, from *Archaeologia Cambrensis* vol. 2 (Wakeman 1847).

CONCLUSIONS

Julius and Aaron have the distinction of being amongst the earliest named Christians from Britain, but the history of their cult has to be pieced together from very thin evidence. The interpretations offered here do no harm to that evidence, but they are certainly not the only

interpretations possible, and I hope that further research, including archaeological investigation at Mount St Albans, will challenge and enhance what is presented here.

In certain respects the history of Julius and Aaron stands as a microcosm for that of Welsh Christianity as a whole. Both probably have their origins in the Romano-British period, and Gildas certainly assumes that his church was continuous with that of Roman Britain, but the evidence is ambiguous, and it is only in the post-Roman centuries that the picture becomes clear (Seaman 2014). The early Middle Ages saw the consolidation of Christianity as the sole religion of the Welsh, and, as attested by the inclusion of Julius and Aaron within the marginalia of a ninth-century Irish manuscript, the Welsh church maintained strong connections with Ireland. The Norman Conquest brought about a period of profound change, which included the introduction of reformed monasticism, the alienation of Welsh churches to foreign monastic houses, and the suppression of native cults (Davies 1987, 172–212); in the story of Julius and Aaron we can see all of these processes at work. The Reformation marked another period of dramatic change, which included the suppression of saints' cults and the removal of shrines from churches; it may have been within this context that the church of St Alban, to successor to Julius and Aaron's original martyrdom, was finally abandoned. In the generations following the Reformation interest in the early history of the British church as it was portrayed by medieval authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas increased (Williams 1953); again we have seen that Julius and Aaron were implicated in this debate. Catholicism was slow to die in Wales however, and 'for centuries, the common people adhered to many of the elements of the Old Faith' (Davies 1993, 240); it is within this context that we should place the incubation cult which was active at Christchurch until the early nineteenth century.

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NOTES

1. De Excidio Britanniae, 10. All references to the De Excidio are to Winterbottom 1978 and unless stated his translations have been followed.
2. Sherley-Price and Latham 1955, 1.7.
3. Richard Whitford in his Martyrology of 1526 (Whitfield 1893) records their feast day as 1 July. This is followed by John Wilson in his English Martyrologie (Wilson 1608) and Nicolas Roscarrock (Baring-Gold and Fisher 1907, 103). It is unlikely to be coincidence that July is derived from the name Julius, whilst the 1st was the day assigned to the high-priest Aaron, son of Abraham (Levison 1941, 343, n. 11). Julius and Aaron are now celebrated alongside Alban on 20 June: The Book Of Common Prayer for use in the Church in Wales: the New Calendar and the Collects (Canterbury Press, 2003), 10.
4. Evans 1893, 26.
5. Sherley-Price and Latham 1955, 1.8.
6. Bartrum 1966, 11.
7. St Gallen, MS 904, 242a, which can be viewed at <http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0904>
8. Thorpe 1973, ix. 12.
9. Thorpe 1978, I, 5.
10. Winterbottom 1978 identifies this location as Caerleon (Monmouthshire), but until this is affirmed (see below) I will retain the literal translation.
11. Ian Wood has suggested that the Passio was propagated by Germanus of Auxerre as part of his campaign against British Pelagians (Wood 2009, 3), but see Higham 2014.
12. De Excidio Britanniae 10.2.
13. Evans 1893, 225.
14. There are several Juliuses on legionary epitaphs from Caerleon, for example Roman Inscriptions of Britain 1 (Collingwood and Wright 1965), 317, 360, 362, 363, 375.
15. Although it must be remembered that Eusebius was Constantine's bishop of Caesarea and was therefore likely to have been rather circumspect about Constantius' (the father of Constantine) religion (Henig 2001, 24).
16. Roman Inscriptions of Britain 1 (Collingwood and Wright 1965), 395.

17. Victricius of Rouen, who had visited Britain around 396, may have been referring to Alban when he mentioned a saint in his sermon *De Laude Sanctorum* who whilst ‘in the hands of the executioners, told rivers to draw back, lest he should be delayed in his haste [to martyrdom]’ (Clarke 1999, 398). For possible archaeological evidence for activity near to Alban’s shrine in the late fourth century see Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001.
18. Following Davies (1979) charters are referred to using their page number within Evans’ (1893) edition of the *Book of Llandaf*.
19. Davies (1979, 97, 121) gives a date of c. 864, but notes that this is an approximation.
20. *Monasticon Anglicanum* (Dundale 1830, vol. 6, 2, 1022). The grant is known from an *inspeximus* and confirmation of Edward I of 1290 (see *Calendar of the Charter Rolls* preserved in the Public Record Office. Volume 2. Henry III – Edward I. A.D. 1257–1300 (London, HMSO, 1906), 358, no. 1). The year 1113 is mentioned in the confirmation of Henry I preserved by another *inspeximus* of 1290 (*ibid.*, 361, no. 1), but this date appears to have been the result of a forgery made at Bec (Richard Sharpe *in litt.* 2015). The first roll is repeated in an *inspeximus* of Edward II of 1320 (*Calendar of the Charter Rolls* preserved in the Public Record Office. Volume 3. Edward I, Edward II. A.D. 1300–1326 (London, HMSO, 1908), vol. 3, 434).
21. ST 3467 8935.
22. The loss of the element *merthyr* is not surprising and can be paralleled elsewhere in Wales, including several other examples from the *Book for Llandaf*. For example, the *podum Merthir Tecmed* of charter 199a (c. 750), became *Ecclesia de Landegeneth* in the *Taxatio* of 1291, and *Merthirmaches* of charter 211b (c. 775) became *Ecclesia de Lanmathesis* (Denton and Taylor 1998).
23. National Library of Wales, *St Pierre Documents MS. 33*.
24. For King John’s confirmation see T. D. Hardy (ed.), *Rotuli Chartarum*, vol. 1, (London, 1837), 95. The 1143 confirmation is an *inspeximus* of 1290 *Calendar of the Charter Rolls* preserved in the Public Record Office. Volume 2. Henry III – Edward I. A.D. 1257–1300 (London, HMSO, 1906), 362, no. 2.
25. Edith Evans (2004, 115) and Jeremy Knight (2013, 27), citing the 1802 edition of the *Taxatio* (Astle et al. 1802). Note the inclusion the church of *St Aaron* (*ecclie de Seint Aron*), which Knight suggests may have been a scribal error for Alban. But since this entry is listed alongside churches at *Porthcasseg* and *St Kingsmark* it is much more likely to be a scribal error for *St Arvon* (which lies between the aforementioned

- parishes)—as it is listed in the more accurate edition given by Denton and Taylor 1998, 146.
26. The reluctance to elevate the relics of saints in Wales prior to the Norman Conquest (Edwards 2002, 236–8) suggests that this did not take place prior to the late eleventh century.
 27. The value given in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 is £23 9s 4d, just over a third of which (£8) is listed as *Pro oblacionibus peregrinorum* (Caley and Hunter 1821 vol. 4, 374).
 28. The present church of SS Julius and Aaron located at ST 3229 8947 was only consecrated in 1926 (Ellis 1975).
 29. The site of St Alban’s chapel is marked on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1882 at ST 3240 8995, and continues to appear on all subsequent editions. It is not certain why the chapel is marked in this exact position, but it would seem, from the Ordnance Survey record cards, that the location was determined by a yew tree which according to Coxe (1801, 95) ‘marks the site’.
 30. More tenuous archaeological evidence for a church at Mount St Albans includes a possible Gothic-style finial which was recently recovered from the vicinity of the site (Mark Lewis pers. Comms 2010), and fragments of ashlar blocks observed within the fabric of nineteenth-century farm buildings which may have been robbed from a high status building such as a church or chapel.
 31. Thorpe 1973, ix. 12.
 32. Thorpe 1978, I. 5.
 33. Francis Godwin, *De praesulibus Angliae commentarius omnium episcoporum, necnon et cardinalium eiusdem gentis, nomina, tempora, seriem, atque actiones maximè repetita complexus* (London, 1616), 626.
 34. *Britannia* (Camden 1607 edn), 492. Sir George Herbert is thought to have settled at Christchurch in the late fifteenth century, at which point Joseph Bradney suggested the manor house was built (Bradney 1932, 295, 299; Kennerley 1973). However, the earliest record of the place-name St Julian’s which I have been able to find is in the will of 1566/67 (Bradney 1932, 296), and it is possible that the name is not much older than this. William Coxe noted that near to St Julian’s house ‘is an old barn of small dimensions, which was once part of the chapel of St Julius . . . on the south wall are the remains of an arched entrance, which is now half filled up, the east and west windows may be traced, and a small Gothic doorway to the west, still remains in its original

- state' (Coxe 1801, 103–4). According to Olive Ellis the barn was taken down around 1884, and some of the stone was reused for present church of SS Julius and Aaron (Ellis 1975). In 1774 a 'pilgrim finely cut in jet with gold cross round the neck, found in the Ruins of St Julien's Chapel at Caerleon, Monmouthshire' was sold at auction in London (Evans 1922: 418). This object cannot be dated, but is unlikely to be medieval. Whilst the remains of a chapel must have existed here in the nineteenth century, Camden's reference to the church at St Julian's was in the past sense, and so the remains of a chapel reported above are most likely to have belonged to a private chapel of the Herberts rather than an ancient foundation. St Julian's House was demolished in the mid-twentieth century and the site is now built over (Evans 2004, 114). The first edition Ordnance Survey map located the chapel at ST 3240 8995.
35. Britannia (Camden 1586 edn), 492.
 36. The first edition Ordnance Survey map located the chapel at ST 3395 91160. Barrington-Gould and Fisher (1907, 102) state that 'here stone coffins have been found, showing that it was a place of Christian interment', I have not been able to find any further references to burial at this site, and whilst this could be indicative of early medieval cist burial, given the site's proximity to the Caerleon's extramural cemeteries it is more likely to refer to the discovery of Roman sarcophagi. Ellis (1975) stated that the remains of the chapel were demolished about 1870, but I have not been able to find any evidence to support this.
 37. On the basis of field-names on the Tithe apportionment this field can be located at around ST 3450 9117 (Evans 2004, 115). Octavius Morgan (1882, iv) noted that an excavation undertaken here by Revd Canon Edwards revealed 'some small pieces of window glass and plaster and foundations of walls and of mortar floor were found, but nothing to indicate the nature of the building'. Evidence of Roman burials were discovered in the vicinity in the late nineteenth century, and more recent archaeological investigation has revealed further Roman burials, but no evidence for a chapel or the building noted by Morgan has been identified (Evans 2004, 115–6).
 38. The *De Excidio* was published by Polydore Vergil in 1525 and by John Joscelyn in 1568.
 39. An English translation is given in Evans 1925. Gerald of Wales described Julius and Aaron as being of 'noble birth' (Thorpe 1978, I, V), and it is probably this that led Davies to describe Aaron as a 'chief' of Glamorgan.

40. Jeremy Knight (2013, 27) noting the presence of a field called *Cae'r Scudor* ('field of the barn') in a deed of 1728 suggests that the chapel of St Alban may have been converted into a barn. Two field-names on the Tithe apportionment for Llanfrechfa, Waun arron (located at approximately ST 3284 9315) and Cae aron (located at approximately ST 3009 9596) may attest to the continuity of a local tradition, and are presumably the same fields as the Cae Aron and Cwm Aron referred to by Baring-Gould and Fisher (1907, 103).
41. I am extremely grateful to Tristan Gray Hulse for drawing this to my attention.
42. The stone is now located in the southern chapel, but in the nineteenth century it is recorded as being in the chancel (Wakeman 1847, 85).
43. For the continuity of Catholic practices within an otherwise Protestant milieu see Thomas (1971, 80–5), who cites the example of St Beuno's in Clynnog (Caernarvonshire) where in the later seventeenth century it was still believed that a sick person laid on St Beuno's tomb on a Friday would either recover or die within three weeks.

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