

The Church of Julius, Aaron, and Alban at Caerleon

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Introduction

In his fictional account of King Arthur's Whitsuntide crown-wearing at Caerleon Geoffrey of Monmouth (writing c. 1136) described how the town was famous for two churches; the first was 'built in honour of the martyr Julius, and graced by a choir of most lovely virgins dedicated to God', and the second was 'founded in the name of the blessed Aaron, the companion of Julius', it was 'served by a monastery of canons, and counted as the third metropolitan see of Britain'.¹ Gerald of Wales was notoriously disparaging of the *Historia Regum Britannie*, but in his *Itinerarium Cambriae* (written c. 1191) he also stated that Caerleon had been famous for churches built in honour of Julius and Aaron.² Both writers were clearly aware of the tradition linking Julius and Aaron, the Roman martyrs of the 'City of the Legions' with Caerleon, but they were writing about a distant pseudohistorical past and neither implied that the churches were extant in the twelfth century. However, the antiquarians William Camden and Francis Godwin, writing either side of the year 1600, not only reiterated the story of Julius and Aaron's churches, but also implied that they had stood until recently³. Indeed, by the late nineteenth-century the church sites were marked by the Ordnance Survey⁴. There is no doubting the strength of the association between Julius and Aaron and Caerleon, but examination of the evidence reveals discrepancies about their churches that call for explanation. In this article I will argue that there is little evidence that *separate* churches dedicated to the martyrs existed at or near to Caerleon during the Middle Ages. Moreover, it is suggested that the churches sites identified on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey owe more to religious tensions following of the Reformation than historical reality. Nevertheless, a single church dedicated to both martyrs, and at some points also St Alban, can be identified in the medieval charter evidence, and a strong case can be made for placing this church at Mount St Albans in the parish of Christchurch to the south of Caerleon. This church must have been in existence before the ninth century and survived until at least the late fifteenth. Its location above a Roman cemetery outside of a legionary fortress is evocative of the nascent Christian landscapes of Late Antique Europe, and the cult associated with its two Roman martyrs was probably well established by the time Julius and Aaron were mentioned alongside Alban in the sixth century *De Excidio Britanniae*⁵. Thus, as notable members of this Association have previously argued, a case can be made for identifying Mount St Albans as the location of the martyrdom of Julius and Aaron⁶. The site is, therefore, of considerable historical and archaeological interest, and it was this reason that the

¹ Thorpe, Lewis (trans. and ed.), *Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of Kings of Britain* (Penguin, London, 1966) 226.

² Thorpe, Lewis, (trans. and ed.), *Gerald of Wales, The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales* (Penguin, London, 1978) 115.

³ Camden, William, *Britannia sive Florentissimorum regnorum, Angliae, Scotiae, Hiberniae, et insularum adiacentium ex intima antiquitate chorographica description* (London, 1587) 419. Godwin, William, *De praesulibus Angliae commentarius omnium episcoporum, necnon et cardinalium eiusdem gentis, nomina, tempora, seriem, atque actiones maximè memorabiles ab vltima antiquitate repetita complexus* (London, 1616) 626.

⁴ 1st edition County Series (1883). St Julius at: ST32418895; St Aaron at: ST34139176.

⁵ Winterbottom, Michael (trans. and ed.), *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and other works* (Phllimore, Chichester) 19.

⁶ Boon, George, 'The Early Church in Gwent, I: The Romano-British Church', *Monmouthshire Antiquary* VIII (1992), 11–24. Knight, Jeremy, 'Britain's other martyrs: Julius, Aaron and Alban at Caerleon', in (eds.) Henig, M. and Lindley, P. *Alban and St Albans: Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology* (British Archaeological Association, Leeds, 2001) 13–29.

author initiated a programme of survey and excavation, the preliminary results of which are presented at the end of this article.

Historians' Accounts of the Churches of Julius and Aaron

In the first edition of his *Britannia* William Camden quoted Gerald of Wales' description of the churches of Julius and Aaron at Caerleon without giving any indication of their location or suggesting that either was extant at the time he was writing⁷. However, in the much expanded second edition of 1587 and in all subsequent editions and translations he added that the church of St Julius had stood about a mile from the present village of Caerleon, in the manor of St Julians, at the house of Sir William Herbert⁸. Camden says nothing about the location of St Aaron's church, but in 1616 his friend Bishop Francis Godwin stated that the 'chapels' of Julius and Aaron had been located two miles apart on the east and west sides of Caerleon.⁹ Godwin was a life-long friend of Camden, the two had toured south Wales together in 1590 and their correspondence shows that Godwin kept Camden informed of discoveries at Caerleon and Caerwent¹⁰. Thus, it is likely that information about the location of St Julius's church in the second edition of the *Britannia* came from Godwin. St Aaron's chapel was described as being situated to the east of Caerleon, but it is not until 1801 when William Coxe stated that it had stood 'at Penrhos, in the vicinity of the town [Caerleon]' that we are given a more precise indication of its location¹¹. Nevertheless, since Penrhos is to the north-east of Caerleon, it is reasonable to assume that Godwin had Penrhos in mind (see Figure 1).

In the accounts given by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gerald of Wales, William Camden, and Francis Godwin the churches/chapels of Julius and Aaron are referred to in the past tense, although Godwin stated that they existed within 'the memory of our fathers'¹². However, when describing St Julians house in 1801 Coxe noted 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'¹³. According to Olive Ellis this barn survived until around 1884,¹⁴ and unfortunately the house was demolished in the mid-twentieth century without archaeological investigation. Possible collaborative evidence for the existence of this chapel comes in the form of a 'pilgrim finely cut in jet with gold cross round the neck, found in the Ruins of St Julien's Chapel at Caerleon, Monmouthshire' that was sold at auction in London in 1774¹⁵, but had these remains been standing during the late-sixteenth century, it is surprising that it was not described as such by Camden or Godwin.

The same is true of the St Aaron's at Penrhos, but here the evidence for its existence is even weaker. Neither Godwin nor Coxe located the chapel site precisely, but the Ordnance Survey and Sabine Baring-Gould and John Fisher placed it within the defences of a Civil War earthwork (which they mistook for a Roman camp) immediately adjacent to Penrhos Farm¹⁶. The evidence cited in support

⁷ Camden, *Britannia* (1586 edition) 363.

⁸ Camden, *Britannia* (1587 edition) 511.

⁹ Godwin, *De praesulibus Angliae*, 626.

¹⁰ Boon, George, 'Camden and the *Britannia*', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 136 (1987) 7.

¹¹ Coxe, William, *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire* (T. Cadell and W. Davies, London, 1801) 95.

¹² Godwin, *De praesulibus Angliae*, 626.

¹³ Coxe *An historical Tour*, 103-4.

¹⁴ Ellis, O. M., 'St Julian's Church, Newport', *Gwent Local History* (1975) 39, 37-40.

¹⁵ Evans, G. E., 'Notes', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1922) 77 (2), 418.

¹⁶ Baring-Gould, S. and Fisher, J., *The Lives of the British Saints: The Saints of Wales and Cornwall and Such Irish Saints as Have Dedications in Britain, Vol. 1* (Honourable Society of

of their suggestion was limited however. Baring-Gould and Fisher stated that stone coffins (presumably cist burials) had been found in the vicinity, 'showing that it was a place of Christian interment', but cists burial was not used exclusively by Christians and given the proximity to extramural cemeteries associated with the Roman fortress their discovery need not imply Christian burials or the presence of a church. Ellis stated that the remains of St Aaron's chapel were demolished about 1870, but it was not depicted on the 1839 Tithe Map, and this may be no more than an educated guess based on the fact that it was not standing at the time of the first edition Ordnance Survey of 1875-81¹⁷. Had the chapel survived so late, it would be surprising that it was not described in the antiquarian literature. Indeed, only a decade later the antiquarian Octavius Morgan placed it around 650m to the south in a 'field near the copper-field' (see Figure 1), and described how an excavation undertaken by Revd Canon Edwards revealed 'some small pieces of window glass and plaster and foundations of walls and of mortar floor..., but nothing to indicate the nature of the building'¹⁸. Roman burials were discovered in the vicinity of this field in the late nineteenth century, and more recent archaeological investigation has revealed further burial evidence, but the case for interpreting the building identified by Evans as St Aaron's chapel is weak¹⁹.

The sources considered thus far are consistent in their assertions that there were churches dedicated to Julius and Aaron at Caerleon (although they are variously described as churches and chapels), but contradiction arises over when they existed. The nineteenth and twentieth century sources identify the locations of the chapels, and one provides us with a description of the ruins of the chapel of St Julius. The earlier antiquarian sources, however, follow Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales in describing the churches in the past tense, with there being no suggestion that they were extant. Indeed, whilst we should be wary of using negative evidence, we can also note that John Leland, writing a generation earlier, made no reference to the chapels of Julius and Aaron, referring only to St Cadog's, the medieval parish church that stands within the centre of the fortress²⁰. The simplest way to reconcile these differences would be to suggest that the chapels described in the later sources were re-foundations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century date, but this is not what is implied in the sources, and other explanations are possible. Before we consider these it is necessary to examine the primary evidence, principally medieval charters.

Medieval Charter Evidence

Leaving aside Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* for the time being, the earliest reference to a church(es) of Julius and Aaron at Caerleon is found in charter 225 of the *Book of Llandaff*. The *Book of Llandaff* 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's²¹. The charters were compiled as part of Urban's legal campaign and are known to be fraudulent within this

Cymmrodorion, London, 1907), 102. Also followed by Bradney, J., *A History of Monmouthshire from the coming of the Normans into Wales down to the present time, Volume IV, The Hundred of Caldicot, Part III* (Mitchell, Hughes and Clarke, London, 1932) 201.

¹⁷ Ellis, 'St Julian's Church, Newport'.

¹⁸ Morgan, Octavius, *Goldcliff and the ancient Roman inscribed stone found there, 1878: together with other papers* (Newport, 1882), IV. Followed by Wade-Evans, A. W., *Nennius's History of the Britons* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1938), 131 note 3.

¹⁹ Evans, Edith, 'Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites in South-East Wales: Rapid field survey of selected sites', unpublished report, Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust (2004), 115-6.

²⁰ Smith, L. T., (trans. and ed.) *The Itinerary in Wales of John Leland in or about the Years 1536-39* (George Bell and Sons, London, 1906), 44.

²¹ Davies, J. R., 'The Book of Llandaff: a twelfth-century perspective', *Anglo-Norman Studies* (1998) 21, 31-46.

twelfth-century context. Nevertheless, Professor 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 describe²². The narration to charter 225 contains standard interpolations and plot-tokens and is unlikely to be genuine. 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 century²³. The charter records the grant of the *territorium sanctorum martrium iulij et aaron* (estate of the holy martyrs Julius and Aaron) by the brothers Wulferth, Hegoi and Arwystl, to Bishop Nudd²⁴. The bounds place the estate to south of Caerleon on the far side of the River Usk, and whilst they cannot be reconstructed in great detail, the estate included land in the parishes of Christchurch and Ceremys Inferior²⁵. There is no direct reference to a church or churches within the text of the charter, but the majority of the estates in the Llandaff charters were associated with a single church and/or settlement, and the term *territorium* was used for a tract of land appurtenant to a church²⁶. In a twelfth century rubric the property is entitled *merthir ivn et aaron*, where the term *merthir* is singular and used to refer to a church dedicated to *both* Julius and Aaron. David Parsons has suggested that this title may be a construct of twelve century redactors²⁷, but the implication that there was a single church dedicated to both martyrs is supported by a series of later charters.

A grant dated to or shortly before 1113 records how Robert Chandos, an Anglo-Norman lord, gave a church at Goldcliff to the monastery of Bec in Normandy for the foundation of a priory. Included in the property that Chandos bestowed upon the priory were two churches: *ecclesiam sanctae Trinitatis iuxta Karlium* and *ecclesiam Iulii et Aron*²⁸. The former can be identified as Holy Trinity church, the benefice of the parish of Christchurch, whilst the latter, the church of Julius and Aaron, is likely to be the same as the one recorded in Llandaff charter 225. Both churches are later recorded in two confirmations; one of c. 1154–58 by Morgan ap Owen and his brother Iorwerd²⁹, and the other of 1204 by Archbishop Hubert Walter of Canterbury³⁰. In all these records we are dealing with a single church dedicated to both Julius and Aaron. Matters are complicated by two other confirmations however, in an 1143 confirmation by the future Henry II the church is named *ecclesiam sanctorum Iulii*

²² Davies, Wendy, *The Llandaff Charters* (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1979). See also Charles-Edwards, T., *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013), 267.

²³ Davies, *Llandaff Charters*, 121.

²⁴ Evans, J. G. (ed.), *The Text of the Book of Llan Dâv* (Oxford, 1893), 225.

²⁵ Coe, J. B. *The Place-Names of the Book of Llandaf*. (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Wales Aberystwyth, 2001), 591-2, 1005-6.

²⁶ Davies, Wendy, *An Early Welsh Microcosm: Studies in the Llandaff Charters* (Royal Historical Society, London, 1978), 42.

²⁷ See below note 50.

²⁸ Dundale, William, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (London, 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.

²⁹ *Calendar of the Charter Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office. Volume 2. Henry III – Edward I. A.D. 1257–1300* (London, HMSO, 1906), 358-9, no 2.

³⁰ *Calendar of the Charter Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office. Volume 2. Henry III – Edward I. A.D. 1257–1300* (London, HMSO, 1906), 361, no 13.

et Aaron, atque Albani (the church of Julius, Aaron, and Alban)³¹, and this triplet occurs again in a 1201 confirmation by King John³². Most commentators have suggested the triplet indicates that the dedication to Alban was accessory³³, but since an *ecclesie Sancti Albon de Kairlion* is recorded in a deed of 1495 and William Coxe also referred to a chapel dedicated to St Alban that had stood ‘on an eminence to the east of Caerleon’, it is possible that in addition to the church of Julius and Aaron, there was a separate foundation dedicated to Alban³⁴. We shall return to this issue shortly, but in the meantime we can note that again there are no grounds for identifying separate churches dedicated to Julius and Aaron. Unfortunately, the church(es) is absent from the *Valuation of Norwich* of 1254, *Taxatio Nicholai* of 1291, and *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535³⁵. This omission can probably be attributed to its low valuation or status as a chapel rather than a full benefice.

Unpicking the Evidence

This review of the evidence has brought to light two contradictions; the secondary sources imply there were separate churches dedicated to Julius and Aaron (and latterly also Alban), but up until the early nineteenth-century these were always referred to in the past tense and the evidence for their existence, outside of the highly dubious Geoffrey of Monmouth, is weak. The charter evidence provides more concrete evidence, but in these we see a single church dedicated to both martyrs, and if there was a separate church it was dedicated to Alban not Julius or Aaron. How are we to account for this? One explanation could be that there had been multiple churches/chapels that were founded and re-founded on separate occasions. This seems unlikely however, and in light of the lack of historical credibility behind the *Historia Regum Britannie*, scholars have attempted to reconcile the different strands of evidence by suggesting that a single church dedicated to both Julius and Aaron had been located at either St Julians or Penrhos, with the other location being a late back-formulation³⁶. On the strength of the antiquarian accounts St Julians would have the stronger claim in this regard, the evidence for Penrhos being later, more ambiguous, and on the wrong side of the river Usk according to the boundary clause attached to Llandaff charter 225. Meanwhile, a second church dedicated to St Alban emerged sometime after 1113. The evidence for latter being the appearance of

³¹ *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.

³² *Calendar of the Charter Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office. Volume 2. Henry III – Edward I. A.D. 1257–1300* (London, HMSO, 1906), 363, no 8. Also printed in Hardy, Thomas, *Rotuli Chartarum* (London, 1837), vol. 1, part 1, 95.

³³ Levison, W., ‘St Alban and St Albans’, *Antiquity* 16 (1942) 337–59. Knight, Jeremy, ‘Britain’s other martyrs’; *South Wales from the Romans to the Norman: Christianity, Literacy and Lordship* (Amberley Publishing, Stroud, 2013). Seaman, Andy, ‘Julius and Aaron ‘Martyrs of Caerleon’: in search of Wales’ first Christians’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 164 (2015) 201–20.

³⁴ The deed, National Library of Wales, St Pierre Documents MS. 33, is referred to in Bradney, *History of Monmouthshire*, 205. Coxe, *An historical Tour*, 95. Levison, ‘St Alban and St Albans’, 340.

Wade-Evans when so far as to argue that this was Alban’s *martyrium* and the site of his execution. Wade-Evans, A. W., ‘The Site of St Alban’s Martyrdom’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 5 (1905), 256–9.

³⁵ Evans, ‘Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites’, 115 and Knight *South Wales*, 27, citing the 1802 edition of the *Taxatio* (Astle, T., Ayscough, S. and Caley, J. (eds), *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae auctoritate P. Nicholai IV, circa A.D. 1291* (Record Commission, London, 1802), note the inclusion the church of St Aaron (*eccleie 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 an error for St Arvon (which lies between the aforementioned parishes), as it is listed in the more accurate edition in Denton, J. and Taylor, B., ‘The 1291 Valuation of the Ecclesiastical Benefices of Llandaff Diocese’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 147 (1998), 133–58.

³⁶ Evans, ‘Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites’, 114–6. Levison, ‘St Alban and St Albans’, 341.

ecclesiam sanctorum Iulii et Aaron, atque Albani in two charter confirmations, Coxe's reference to St Alban's chapel, and a deed of 1495 that refers to the overseers St Alban's church at Caerleon.

Jeremy Knight has presented an alternative and more convincing way to reconcile the evidence however. In his interpretation there was only ever one church, during the Middle Ages at least, but its dedication changed from Julius and Aaron, to Julius, Aaron, and Alban, and finally just to Alban³⁷. If we assume that *ecclesiam sanctorum Iulii et Aaron, atque Albani* referred to a single church, which given the ambiguous phrasing of the Latin is possible, Alban must have been added to the dedication at some point after the mid-ninth century. This need not be surprising since Julius and Aaron were relatively obscure saints who were known through their association with Alban in both Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* and Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*. Levison suggests that relics of Alban came to south Wales around 1129 when his shrine at St Albans (Hertfordshire) was opened. He argued that the link came 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 Bec³⁸. Tristan Gray Hulse, however, has drawn attention to the fact that Alban appears in the dedication 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' *Itinerarium Cambriae* (written c. 1191). Thus, he has suggested that there was a growing tradition linking Alban with Caerleon in the twelfth century, and a transference of relics was not necessary to explain why Alban was added to the dedication³⁹. If this did occur it allows us to bring the church of St Alban (*ecclesie Sancti Albon de Kairlion*) recorded in the deed of 1495 into the picture, but would imply that after Alban was added he 'proved something of a cuckoo in the nest' and eventually supplanted Julius and Aaron to be left as the sole patron⁴⁰. There is little firm evidence to support this suggestion, but it is not invisible given that we know that church dedications were not static, and the relative obscurity of Julius and Aaron when compared to Alban could go some way to explaining how they were swept aside.

If this interpretation is correct, then we should be looking for the church of Julius and Aaron (and later Alban) not at St Julians or Penrhos, but at Mount St Albans where Coxe stated that St Alban's chapel had stood⁴¹. Indeed, when we look at this site in more detail we find further, albeit tentative, support for our hypothesis. Mount St Albans lies within the parish of Christchurch, the benefice of which was granted to Goldcliff alongside the church of Julius and Aaron, and it sits more comfortably within the bounds of the *territorium sanctorum martirum iulij et aaron* than St Julians⁴². The archaeological evidence from Mount St Albans is also more positive; a lease of 1728 records the field-name *Cae'r Fynwent* ('field of the graveyard'), and in 1801 Coxe stated that 'an adjoining piece of land [to the chapel] is still called the Chapel Yard today'. It is surely not a coincidence that he also noted that in 1785 'several stone coffins were discovered in digging foundations of a new house'⁴³ (See Figure 2). This must be a reference to the discovery of cist burials—a form of burial practice known to have been

³⁷ Knight, Jeremy, 'The earl church in Gwent, II' *Monmouthshire Antiquarian* IX (1993), 2-3; 'Britain's other martyrs'; 'South Wales'.

³⁸ Levison 'St Alban and St Albans', 343.

³⁹ Gray Hulse, Tristan, in litt. (2009).

⁴⁰ Knight, 'South Wales', 27.

⁴¹ ST36139111. Goldcliffe Priory had lost the majority of its possessions by the mid-fifteenth century so St Alban's church being in secular hands in 1495 does not present a problem. Burton, Janet, and Stöber, Karen, *Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2015), 98.

⁴² Coe, 'Place-names', 591-2; Parsons, David, *Martyrs and Memorials: Merthyr Place-Names and the Church in Early Wales* (University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth, 2013), 87.

⁴³ For the lease see Bradney, *History of Monmouthshire*, 306. For the 'Chapel yard' and burials see Coxe, *An Historical Tour*, 95. The 'new house' is likely to be Mount St Albans house, which stood until the 1970s.

associated with early medieval churches in western Britain. Jeremy Knight has 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 downslope from Mount St Albans). The Bulmore cross has no exact provenance, but all of the other examples of early medieval cross slabs from Monmouthshire were associated with important early medieval churches, and it would be surprising if this were not the case here. Given Bulmore's proximity to Mount St Albans this must be a strong candidate for such a church⁴⁴. Finally, archaeological excavation undertaken by the author also adds credence to the argument (see below).

Thus, a case can be made for identifying Mount St Albans as the site of a church that was established before the mid-ninth century and stood until at least 1495⁴⁵. Here we should pause to note that Julius and Aaron are identified as Roman martyrs in the sixth century *De Excidio Britanniae*, and Gildas implies that their *martyrium* at the 'City of the Legions' was an important cult site when he was writing around 530/40⁴⁶. There has been considerable debate about the identity of the 'City of the Legions', but Caerleon retains the strongest claim⁴⁷. Mount St Albans is located on a prominent hill overlooking Caerleon. It lies between the Roman roads leading to Usk and Caerwent, and the church would have stood on the edge of an extensive area of cemeteries that extended along the northern side of Chepstow Hill (See Figure 1). Thus, the location of the church is evocative of the extramural martyria of Late Antique Europe, and a credible case has been made for identifying Mount St Albans as the site of the martyrium of Julius and Aaron⁴⁸. The place-name *merthir iun et aaron* in the *Book of Llandaff* has long been cited as the vital link between the ninth century and the shine referred to by Gildas, with the *Merthir* element seen as deriving from the Latin *Martyrium*, the term used since the fourth century to designate a church built over the grave of a Christian martyr⁴⁹. David Parson's detailed re-examination of the place-name evidence has severed this link however, and he makes a strong case for *Merthyr* originally denoting a place of real or presumed early Christian burial. Although as mentioned above, he sees the *merthyr iun et aaron* of Llandaff charter 225 as a scribal association of the twelfth century⁵⁰. Be this as it may, it remains the case that a church dedicated to Julius and Aaron, two Roman martyrs associated with Caerleon since the early sixth century, appears to have been located on the outskirts of Caerleon's Roman cemetery in a position that is reminiscent of Late Antique martyria on the Continent. It was for this reason that the author initiated a programme of archaeological fieldwork on the site, the preliminary results of which are considered below. First, however, we must consider a question that arises out of the remaining strands of the evidence - if separate churches dedicated to Julius and Aaron did not exist at Caerleon, why did Camden and Godwin state that they had, and how did these 'chapels' come to be located at St Julians and Penrhos?

⁴⁴ Knight 'Britain's other Martyrs', 40–1; Redknapp, M. and Lewis J. M. *Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Volume One* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2007) 505–8, 579–80.

⁴⁵ The church is absent from the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (1535), which could imply it was abandoned before the Reformation.

⁴⁶ Seaman, 'Julius and Aaron', 205.

⁴⁷ To the list of locations discussed and discounted in Seaman, 'Julius and Aaron', we can now add Leicester. Breeze, Andrew, 'Legionum Urbs and the British Martyrs Aaron and Julius', *Voprosy onomastiki* 13.1 (2016) 30–42.

⁴⁸ Boon, 'Early church'. Knight, 'Britain's Other Martyrs'.

⁴⁹ Williams H., *Gildae, De Excidio Britanniae, Fragmenta, Liber de Paenitentia, Accedit et Lorica Gildae* (London, 1899) 26–7; *Christianity in Early Britain* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912) 105. For a modification of this interpretation see Sharpe, Richard, 'Martyrs and local saints in Late Antique Britain', in (eds.) Thacker, A. and Sharpe, R. *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002), 75–154.

⁵⁰ Parsons, *Martyrs and Memorials*, 39, 52–3.

In the following section it will be argued that this situation owed more to the religious convictions of the local gentry following the Reformation than any genuine historical basis.

British Martyrs and the Reformation

Camden was the figurehead of the sixteenth-century 'historical revolution', but the extent to which his endeavours, and those of his contemporaries, were tempered by the religious debates of the time should not be understated⁵¹. Interpretation of scripture was fundamental to the debates and disagreements that followed the Reformation, but both Protestants and Catholics also looked to history, and early British Christian history in particular, to affirm and legitimise their positions⁵². Catholics looked to Bede's narrative of the Augustinian conversion to affirm the papalist heritage of British Christianity, but Protestant writers saw Augustine's mission as an aberration, and sought to demonstrate continuity between pre-Augustinian British Christianity and the new establishment. Thus, Joseph of Arimathea and King Lucius, rather than Augustine of Canterbury, were central to the Protestant cause⁵³. St Alban, who was indelibly linked to Julius and Aaron in Geoffrey of Monmouth as well as Bede and Gildas, was seen by both Protestants and Catholics as foundational to their accounts of early British Christianity⁵⁴, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that Julius and Aaron were also drawn into the debate. Indeed, they are mentioned alongside Alban in the 1570 and subsequent editions John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*⁵⁵, and in a Protestant exposition of early British church history given in the preface to the 1567 Welsh version of the New Testament Aaron is identified as one of the 'chiefs of the land of Morgan [Glamorgan]'⁵⁶. Given the ambiguities that have arisen over the location and indeed existence of the chapels of Julius and Aaron prior to the sixteenth century we must ask ourselves whether it was coincidence that St Julius's chapel came to be associated with the manor house of the Herberts of St Julians, a strong Protestant family with royal connections, or that in 1600 the site of St Aaron's church at Penrhos was acquired by the Morgans of Llantarnam who were leading recusant Catholics. Before the Reformation the Herberts and Morgans had been connected by marriage, but they were now on opposite sides of a growing religious divide⁵⁷. The Morgans were known to have purchased former monastic estates in Monmouthshire⁵⁸, but it is also possible that these families sought to bolster their positions by claiming that the churches of Caerleon's Roman martyrs had once stood on their lands. Indeed, such claims could have been instigated by the discovery of Romano-British remains that were mistaken for a church or chapel. Sir George Herbert appears to have settled at Christchurch in the late fifteenth century, but the earliest reference to the place-name St Julians that the author has found appears in a will of 1566/67, and it is possible that the name and the tradition of the chapel of St Julius is not much older than that⁵⁹. Perhaps then, the ruins of the chapel of St Julius described by Coxe in 1801 was a private chapel built by the Herberts on what was taken to be the site of the original chapel? The traditions linking Julius and Aaron to Caerleon would

⁵¹ Curran, John, *Roman Invasions: The British History, Protestant Anti-Romanism and the Historical Imagination in England 1530-1660* (University of Delaware Press, Delaware, 2002).

⁵² Heal, F., 'Appropriating History: Catholic and Protestant Polemics and the National Past', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, 1-2, (2005) 109-32.

⁵³ Williams, G., 'Some Protestant views of Early British Church History', *History* 38, 134 (1953), 219-33. Heal, F., 2005. 'What can King Lucius do for you? The Reformation and the Early British Church', *English Historical Review* 120, 487 (2005), 593-614.

⁵⁴ Chapman, Alison, *Patrons and Patron Saints in Early Modern English Literature* (Routledge, London, 2013), 76.

⁵⁵ Foxe, John, *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1570), 3, 124, 161.

⁵⁶ Translated in Evans, A. O., *A Memorandum on the Legality of the Welsh Bible and the Welsh Version of the Book of Common Prayer* (W. Lewis, Cardiff, 1925).

⁵⁷ Kennerley, E., 'The Herberts of St. Julians', *Gwent Local History*, 35 (1975) 8-18.

⁵⁸ Williams, G., *Wales and the Reformation* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1997), 331.

⁵⁹ Bradney, *History of Monmouthshire*, 295-6, 299

have been reinvigorated by the Reformation, but as we have seen, Julius and Aaron had slipped from the dedication of their original church before 1495, and this church, now dedicated to Alban, appears to have been abandoned soon after. Thus, the churches of Julius and Aaron were free to be re-discovered in other locations.

Excavations at Mount St Albans: Preliminary Results

In 2007 the author undertook a programme of geophysical survey within the field that the Ordnance Survey placed the site of St Alban's chapel. This is assumed to be the field described as the 'Chapel yard' by Coxe and named as *Cae'r Fynwent* in the lease of 1728. The cist burials referred to by Coxe must have been discovered below Mount St Albans House, which stood to the immediate south (see Figure 2). The survey revealed several features of potential archaeological interest, and so a small-scale programme of test-pit excavation was undertaken in 2008. The test-pits showed that the geophysical anomalies were largely geological in origin, but archaeological deposits associated with Roman and medieval pottery were encountered in one test-pit in the north-east corner of the field. Due to time constraints these were exposed in plan and recorded, but not fully excavated⁶⁰. A change of employment circumstances meant that the author was unable to revisit the site until August 2014, when expansion of the test-pit revealed numerous features associated with pottery of thirteenth- to sixteenth-century date as well as small quantities of Roman material, including pottery and a complete brick. Time constraints meant that again features were exposed, sampled, and recorded in plan, but not fully excavated. However, in August 2016 the trench was expanded again, most of the features were sectioned, and slots were excavated through deposits in two key areas. The latest feature identified was a nineteenth century sawpit and associated drains, but at least three phases of medieval deposits were identified (See Figure 3). A small quantity Romano-British pottery was also recovered.

The latest medieval features included post-holes and pits associated with and cut into a substantial stone-line drain that contained medieval pottery, including glazed jug sherds. The drain was aligned SW-NE and followed the natural slope. It was truncated by later features at both ends. Earlier features examined in the two slots included two sections of swallow ditch, one aligned NE-SW (Ditch 1) and the other SE-NW (Ditch 2). It was not possible to resolve their stratigraphic relationship, but the two ditches appear to lie perpendicular to one another and could define a building or enclosure. Samples of short-life wood charcoal from a secondary fill of Ditch 1 produced radiocarbon dates of 1043-1224 AD and 1206-1277 AD at 2 sigma calibration. This ditch ran on the same alignment as the excavation slot and was truncated by a modern drain at the SW end, so it was not possible to determine its full extent in plan. The primary fill of the eastern ditch did not produce any datable material, but medieval jug and jar sherds was recovered from the upper fill that was truncated by the later stone-lined drain. This flat bottomed ditch was at least 1.3m wide, and cut an earlier post-hole and what appears to be an E-W aligned grave, although the full extent of this feature was not exposed. The ditch shared the same alignment of the later drain, but was filled with a considerable quantity of loose sandstone rubble. Another probably W-E aligned grave that was truncated by a pit was identified immediately to the north. Bone preservation was poor, but small fragments were recovered through floatation of the fills and have tentatively been identified as human. A possible coffin nail and sherds of medieval pottery were retrieved. Finds included over 250 sherds of medieval pottery, at least four sherds of Roman pottery, as well of several iron objects. The stratigraphically earliest contexts contained very little datable material culture, although an iron nail head or rove was recovered from the post-hole cut by Ditch 2. It is possible that these deposits date to the early medieval period, but radiocarbon dating is needed to confirm this. A full programme of post-excavation analysis is currently underway.

⁶⁰ Seaman, Andy, 'Caerleon, Mount St Albans', *Archaeology in Wales* 49 (2009) 123.

The small scale of the excavations undertaken in 2014-16 prevent all but very tentative interpretation of the features encountered. Nevertheless, the presence pits, ditches, post-holes, and burials associated with medieval pottery is a significant discovery that gives credence to the antiquarian accounts of there being burials and a church or chapel within the locality. Thus far, no definite structural evidence of such a building has been encountered, but the stone-lined drain must be associated with a substantial structure to the east, and it possible that the church lies under the present agricultural buildings. Indeed, fragments of ashlar building stone incorporated into the fabric of these buildings may be derived from such a structure. The ditch sections recorded in 2016 and could represent robbed wall trenches, but the form and extent and depth of these features and the deposits associated with have not yet been fully established. No Romano-British features have been identified thus far, but residual finds suggest that earlier features may be present. The fieldwork undertaken between 2008 and 2016 has established that the site has great potential, but a series of important questions remain unanswered. Thus, the author is currently seeking funding to undertake a further, more extensive, campaign of research excavation.

Conclusions

The evidence discussed in this article is complex and contradictory, and could be read in different ways. It has been argued that Geoffrey of Monmouth's description of Caerleon set later generations of historians on a wild goose chase in search of the churches of Julius and Aaron, whilst the location of the original church, which was dedicated to both martyrs and may have stood on the site of their martyrdom, was forgotten. Excavation at Mount St Albans has demonstrated that this site holds significant research potential, but more extensive excavation is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about the date and interpretation of the medieval features within the 'Chapel yard'.

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