

## **'Pagan and Christian' Conference, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic, Cambridge, 23–24 September 2011**

### **Summary Report**

#### *Background*

This was the first of a series of colloquia to advance our understanding of the conversion of Ireland and Britain from the early centuries AD to the ninth century. This colloquium concentrated on five themes and in doing so attempted to cover Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Icelandic, Romano-British (and less so British), Scottish (Irish and Pictish) perspectives (programme attached). The five themes were (i) perceptions of 'pagan' and 'Christian' (ii) ritual (iii) material and documentary evidence: problems and solutions (iv) conversion processes, and (v) theory and modern examples: how useful are they?

Advancing the dialogue: issues raised and future discussion

Many issues were discussed relating to theoretical approaches and analysis of evidence from various disciplines (anthropology, archaeology, history, language, literature, comparative religious studies etc), and from the different geographical regions covered by the colloquium:

#### *Definition of pagan and Christian*

Who is a pagan and who is a Christian? The reply to this question can vary depending on the discipline and on the historical source. Paganism can be associated with concepts of barbarism and perceptions of association with the *populus Romanum* or can be localized between Christian and non-Christian communities within one region (as Patrick viewed Irish converts and the *gentes* in Ireland). Missions can be from one 'barbarian' people to another as in the case of Columba's mission in Scotland. Communities can be viewed in terms of good and bad Christians, and good and bad pagans. In historical terms, a key element is the need to be aware of a narrative's purpose and audience (e.g. Patrick writing for a specific British 'religious' audience versus Gildas writing with a more military or political purpose). Linking ethnic or group identity with conversion to Christianity occurs (as in eleventh-century Iceland) and is used as an underlying theme of many conversion narratives.

How can we define a dividing line between pagan and Christian? This is far more blurred than narratives of conversion often represent and is not always clear in the archaeological record. One approach might be to explore the concept of conversion by increment as espoused by Gregory the Great. This process involved two strands, the public practice of religion and private devotion. The Christian moral code was implemented in public life while it was also internalized by individuals. Baptism was essential to this process and involved significant elements such as education into Christianity, renunciation of idolatry and rejection of the gods and finally a profession of the new faith. Conversion of a people could occur as a result of a specific mission which succeeded in converting a king who in turn led his kingdom's conversion at a public assembly. Following on such a process, a king or dynasty might espouse the institutional church and cause the erection of churches and acceptance of the pivotal role of bishops in stabilizing the new religion. The acceptance of Christianity by certain classes in society who were in authority or influential appears to provide the necessary impetus to the conversion process. These groups often had an interest in consolidating

their influence over other sections of society and appeared to use Christianity as one device in which to extend their power. There was also the conversion of individuals which is less frequently mentioned in conversion narratives (e.g. Patrick on women becoming virgins of Christ, *Confessio* §§41-2; Adomnán on the child raised from the dead, VC ii.32). How long the process of conversion might take is difficult to estimate, although a fifty-year period has been suggested for Christianity taking root in Iceland, and there as elsewhere, people probably did not discard their 'pagan' ways completely.

#### *What was the old religion, its beliefs, rituals and ritualists?*

By rejecting the 'old' religion and accepting a new religion, what were people abandoning? Did a universal belief system exist or were there regional variations? Did one society's beliefs influence those of other neighbouring societies? The 'old' religion might be understood from its rituals e.g. different rites such as rites of passage, calendrical rites, rites of exchanges etc. but unpicking the genuine tenets of this belief system from medieval literature and even later folklore has always been contentious. For example, can a pantheon of gods be deduced from literature or from genealogies or can a separation between bad and powerful gods (who became demons) and acceptable gods (who become saints, heroes, or more benign otherworldly beings) be detected? One approach is to focus on a specific area using archaeological, historical and literary evidence. The use of water and watery places is an obvious choice as such places are often sites of votive depositions, are linked to presumed deities and to miraculous properties (both in pagan and Christian customs). Similarly burial rites and the landscape of cemeteries offer potential insights into the 'old' religion: how and where people were buried reflects a society's interest not just in the immediate loss of an individual and how that person is regarded but also how people used ancestors to declare their beliefs (e.g. by re-using earlier monuments, by moving away from old cemeteries). The landscape itself might yield information through the identification of the religious/ritual landscape and its relationship with the profane/settled landscape (e.g. the process in Iceland involving farmsteads, cemeteries and churches). Onomastic studies might also yield hints as to the 'old' religion.

Who organized and performed the 'old' religion? This introduces the question of the existence of a priesthood and also of other specialists who carried out daily devotional practices (often as part of medical/healing routines). Anthropological models would suggest that a priesthood existed which conducted public religious ceremonies such as the proclamation of a priest-king, the dedication of temples (the centre of a society's cosmos). If such priesthoods existed in the various regions under consideration, did they have an intellectual formation and tradition and were aspects of this tradition (e.g. legal aspects) acceptable to a Christian priesthood (which after all reflected the structure of Roman sacerdotal institutions), and other aspects (e.g. the performance of certain rituals) unacceptable? The literature provides some hints as to who these people might be as in groups who are known as 'the people of the sanctuary' (e.g. Corcu Temne/Temenrige in Ireland). There are also suggestions that members of this élite moved from the 'old' to the new Christian priestly cast (e.g. James Campbell's suggestion re Bede's origins).

#### *Processes of conversion in the landscape*

Do new monuments appear in the landscape with Christianization and are old monuments set aside or re-used for other purposes? Core to this discussion is the re-use of funerary monuments, the appearance of larger cemeteries, the foundation of churches and the abandonment of

shrines/temples/feast-halls, the re-use of monuments such as pillar stones, and the shift (or otherwise) from certain forms to another (e.g. the use of rectilinear plans in Anglo-Saxons 'monasteries' or curvilinear enclosures in Ireland and Scotland – Jarrow v Portmahomack). Indeed sites like Portmahomack confront scholars with the very question of how to define an early monastery and the influences brought upon a place from elsewhere (from Iona/Ireland, north Britain and the Mediterranean). Another essential element is that of the influence of a pre-existing landscape, and particularly religious landscape of the re-creation of the new Christian landscape. Again the most obvious example is that of wells, but might also include the establishment of churches on earlier cult sites and the transference of old cults to Christian saints' cults and how that phenomenon manifests itself in the landscape. Regional variations of churches, church sites and cemeteries are apparent throughout Ireland and Britain (or are they?), unlike in Iceland where pre-1100AD churches are uniformly small (less than 25m<sup>2</sup>), are located in circular churchyards and are associated with burials. Knowledge of the Icelandic situation is facilitated greatly by the ability to date sites fairly precisely (due to tephra layer) and relatively clear patterns which have emerged as a result of intensive surveying.

While archaeological evidence is usually cited to demonstrate shifts in the landscape and a society's understanding of such changes, literature can also present an impression of how this change is perceived. Hagiography is particularly well-placed to offer these insights, as in the case of Adomnán's depiction of a well in the 'province of the Picts' which made people ill (an inversion of the usual) but with the blessing of Christ Columba banished the demons which 'converted' the water into a curative well.

#### *Wherefore the discussion?*

Apart from the issues raised above, certain themes recurred and were discussed in detail around the project's future direction:

- the value of expanding into other disciplines and areas (e.g. anthropology, sociology, cognitive science, post-colonial theory, historiographical considerations)
- the merit of setting the future 'Converting the Isles' website up as a portal into databases in the field and as a bibliographical source
- taking account of advance in particular areas in the field e.g. as outlined in relation to Anglo-Saxon studies and in the development of the 'Mapping Death' project
- expanding the geographical extent of the project especially to Scandinavia and cooperation with other projects (e.g. the Paderborn project)
- identifying the wide range of definitions of conversion and working through them to try to establish as comprehensive as possible an understanding of the variations of conversion happening during the period under consideration.

There were many other points raised during the colloquium and a considerable amount of specific details and examples mentioned. The above summary is but an overview of the contributions made by the speakers and the participants and is designed as a discussion documents for future plans.

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