

Christianity in the East of Roman Britain

By Martin Henig

The Water Newton Treasure of silver objects includes what may be the earliest surviving examples of Eucharistic plate surviving from the Roman Empire as well as votive items, but this remarkable assemblage needs to be seen in the context of a world of considerable religious diversity.



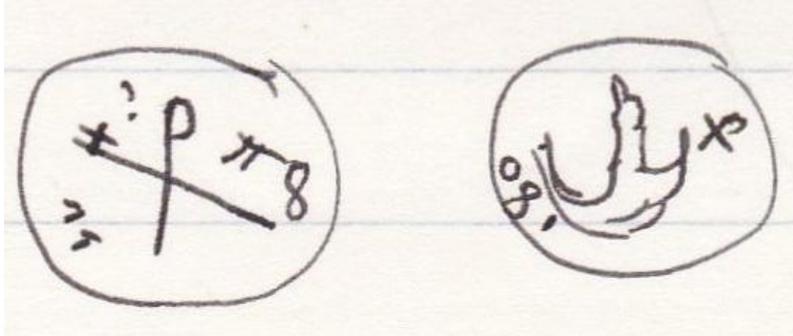
The Water Newton Christian Treasure (BM)

There is, in fact, no certain evidence for Christianity before the early 4th century and the Great Persecution of c.AD 302-4 initiated by Diocletian and his colleagues, the latest but also the most likely period at which Alban, a citizen of Verulamium, and Julius and Aaron at 'the city of the Legions', probably Caerleon, perished (embarrassingly under the administration of Constantine's father, the Caesar Constantius).¹

Under Constantine and his sons Christianity emerged from being a persecuted cult to become the favoured religion of the Emperor and the Empire. This is reflected in, for example, the lead seals of the Province of *Maxima Caesariensis* which employed the chi-rho as a device on lead sealings affixed to goods crossing provincial boundaries. Two were found in the River Mosel at Trier, the chief city of

¹ See M.Henig and P. Lindley (eds.), *Alban and St Albans. Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology*, BAA Conference Transactions XXIV (2001), especially papers by Rosalind Niblett, 'Why Verulamium?', pp.1-12; Martin Henig, 'Religion and Art in St Alban's City', pp.13-29; Richard Sharpe, 'The late antique Passion of St Alban', pp.30-37 and Jeremy K. Knight, 'Britain's other martyrs: Julius, Aaron and Alban at Caerleon', pp.38-44.

the diocese while in Britain there is an example from Silchester, Hampshire,² suggestive of that city being in neighbouring *Britannia Prima* while there seems to be another, only at present known from a very rough sketch from our region at Marholm, Greater Peterborough, presumably in *Britannia Secunda*.³



Sketch of Lead Seal (David Hall)

The chi-rho also figures on coins, most notably those of Magnentius, dating from c 350. Of course, it is obvious that those who applied seals to packages or used coins need not have been Christians though they now lived in a formally Christian Empire.



Christianity defines itself through its dogmas and liturgy, and especially finds physical expression in structures and objects associated with its sacraments, the most distinctive of which are baptism and the Eucharist. For the former there are built baptisteries including in our region one at Icklingham, Suffolk.⁴

Much commoner in southern Britain as far west as Gloucestershire are lead tanks with lug handles, some of them with chi-rhos like the examples from Icklingham, Suffolk and from Ashton near Oundle, Northamptonshire.

² RIB II. Fasc.1, p.94 no.2411.38.

³ S. G. Upex, *The Romans in the East of England, Settlement and Landscape in the Lower Nene Valley* (Stroud 2008), p.229

⁴ C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London 1981), pp. 217-8, fig.40.

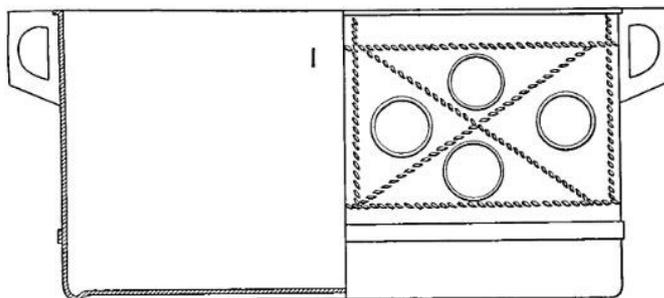


Ashton Lead Tank (photograph by S.G. Upex)

In two cases tanks with even more overtly Christian themes, one from Flawborough, Nottinghamshire depicting praying figures (*orantes*) standing with arms raised in a specifically Christian attitude of prayer and another from Walesby, Lincolnshire with a relief depicting a probable baptismal scene.⁵

Those in our immediate region such as one found in the bed of the river Ouse near Huntingdon, those at Willingham and at Burwell in Cambridgeshire and an unprovenanced example kept in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge bear simple ornament of lines and circles.

1. Found in the bed of the river Ouse, near Huntingdon. Diameter, 29½ inches; height, 15½ inches. There is a band strapping the junction of the base and sides, and other bands cover the vertical joints. The two D-shaped vertical lugs are placed on vertical bands below the flanged rim. The decoration consists of raised cable-pattern, arranged in panels with diagonal lines, and there are large raised circles in the spaces.



⁵RIB II fascicule 2 pp.68-71 nos 2416.8-2416.14; E. Hartley, J. Hawkes, M.Henig and F. Mee, *Constantine the Great. York's Roman Emperor* (Yorkshire Museum, York 2006) pp.208-209, nos 194 and 195 for the Walesby and Flawborough fonts. Upex, *The Romans in the East of England*, pp.227-8, fig.74 for Ashton. B. Crerar, 'Contextualising Romano-British lead tanks. A study in design, destruction and deposition', *Britannia* 43 (2012), pp.135-66 provides the fullest list of these vessels though her attempt to provide alternative explanations for the majority of them does not convince me.



Burwell Lead Tank (MAAC)

Although other uses for these vessels, perhaps for foot-washing, have been suggested, the most likely explanation for them is that they were taken around, presumably on ox-carts by bishops conducting baptisms, and subsequently removed to prevent misuse until they were no longer required. They would of course be too small and shallow for baptism by *immersion*, and the rite was probably effected by *affusion* whereby water was poured over the naked body of the candidate. One interesting feature of these lead fonts is that most have been cut up, such as the examples from Walesby or Barnwell North Lodge Farm, Northamptonshire, or crushed, before being buried like the Flawborough or Ashton fonts, most probably to prevent their superstitious use for nefarious purposes.⁶

The vessels in the Water Newton treasure comprise deep cups, a two-handled ‘chalice’, flagons, a shallow bowl, and a strainer as well as a number of silver votive plaques. Many of the vessels and the plaques bear the Chi-Rho flanked by an alpha and omega and were presented to a church presumably in Durobrivae, in two cases by named individuals. Two women, Innocentia and Viventia gave one cup, while a man called Publianus (his name inscribed on the base) presented another using a phrase redolent of the old Latin Mass:

Sanctum altaretuum, Domine, subnixushonoro which may be translated as ‘Prostrating myself, Lord, I [Publianus] honour your sacred altar.’⁷

One of the votive plaques bears the name of the dedicator, a woman called Iamcilla.⁸

⁶ A. Doig, *Liturgy and Architecture from the Early Church to the Middle Ages* (Aldershot 2008), p.50; M. Henig, ‘The origins of Christian Britain: From Mystery Cult to Christian Mystery; pp.15-32 in P. S. Barnwell, *Places of Worship in Britain and Ireland, 300-950* (Donington 2015), at pp.26-28.

⁷ RIB II, fascicule 2, pp.30-31 nos 2414.1 and 2414.2.

⁸ RIB II. Fascicule 3, p.70 no.2413,1.



Water Newton Cup (BM)

The vessels, as the late Kenneth Painter has convincingly argued, comprise the earliest set of liturgical plate to have survived from Antiquity, presumably dating from the second half of the 4th century.⁹ The plaques however are closely analogous to others dedicated at pagan shrines, amongst them those dedicated to the goddess Senuna at Ashwell, Hertfordshire, to Mars and Vulcan at Barkway also in the same county and to Mars, Jupiter and Vulcan at Stony, Stratford, Buckinghamshire.¹⁰ However, at Water Newton the same type of formula was employed by Iamcilla as that used by her pagan counterparts while on all the plaques the Christian monogram substitutes images of the gods. As Ralph Jackson writes: ‘The Christian god had simply replaced the pagan deity’.¹¹



Water Newton plaque with Chi-Rho (BM)

A number of items of personal use, made of precious metal, attest the presence of elite Christians in the region. In terms of quantity, the 25 items of gold and silver bearing either the Chi-Rho with alpha

⁹ K. S.Painter, ‘The Water Newton Silver. Votive or Liturgical?’, *JBAA* 152 (1999),pp.1-23.

¹⁰ Ralph Jackson and Gilbert Burleigh, *DeaSenuna: Treasure, Cult and Ritual at Ashwell, Hertfordshire* (British Museum Research Publication 194, 2018)

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.139.

and omega, a monogram cross or in one instance the legend 'Vivas in Deo' strongly indicate that the great treasure from Hoxne, Suffolk was owned by Christians. One monogram cross provides the clasp of a gold chain. Others are engraved on the handles of silver ladles or on the bowls of long handled spoons, and three bowls of spoons bear the Chi-Rho.¹²

Three silver long-handled spoons in the Mildenhall Treasure, Suffolk also have a Chi-Rho and alpha and omega engraved on their bowls.¹³



Spoon from the Mildenhall Treasure (BM)

Of greater interest for the presence of Christianity in Eastern Britain are three gold rings of 'Brancaster type', so called because the type specimen was found at Brancaster on the North Norfolk coast. It depicts on its square bezel two facing busts and has an accompanying inscription 'Vivas in Deo'. These rings have recently been reassessed and dated to the very late 4th and the 5th century.¹⁴ An example with a circular hoop engraved with a Chi-Rho comes from Brentwood, Essex;¹⁵ however, the star example is a very large ring with an octagonal bezel from Suffolk depicting a Chi-Rho, a tree of life and a bird, presumably a dove.¹⁶



Brancaster Ring (NCMA)

¹²C.Johns, *The Hoxne Late Roman Treasure. Gold Jewellery and Silver Plate* (British Museum 2010),p.263 fot list.

¹³R.Hobbs, *The Mildenhall Treasure, Late Roman Silver Plate from East Anglia* (British Museum Research Publication 200,2016)pp.22-225 cat.24-26

¹⁴ James Gerrard and Martin Henig, 'Brancaster type signet rings. A study in the material culture of sealing documents in Late Antique Britain', *Bonner Jahrbucher*216 (2016), pp.225-250, see p.246 and pl.1 cat.1.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.247 and pl.3 cat.23.

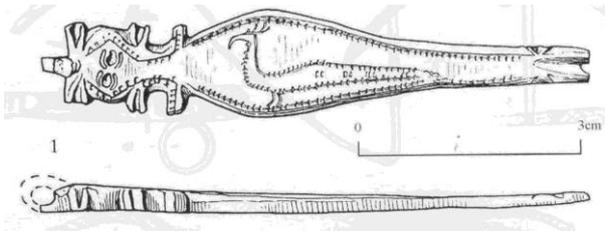
¹⁶ Ibid, p.246 and pl.1 cat.2;Hartley, Hawkes, .Henig and Mee, *Constantine the Great*,p.222no.223..



Suffolk Ring (BM)

This would have been suitable for a high official and perhaps in this context, it is tempting to suggest a bishop. Below the elite level, a pewter tazza with Christian associations comes from Sutton, Isle of Ely.¹⁷ The design incised upon its octagonal flange is dominated by a prominent Chi-Rho with alpha and omega, providing the focus on one of the points of the octagon. Other decoration consists of tritons (sea creatures with human torsos) and an owl like bird and a peacock and two peahens.

While the tritons and owl have no obvious Christian meaning, peacocks are commonly employed as Christian symbols. Their plumage was believed to epitomise the starry heavens and hence immortality; according to St Augustine of Hippo their flesh was incorruptible. Peacocks are figured on contemporary late Roman buckles and strap ends from Britain including the strap end from Orton Longueville, Cambridgeshire.¹⁸



Strap end (S.G. Upex)

It is probable though uncertain, that an unpublished Nene valley jar excavated in 1958 by Brian Hartley near Durobrivae upon which a Chi-Rho was scratched belonged to a Christian. As it was dated on morphological grounds to the late 3rd or early 4th century it may have been of some age when the graffito was scratched.¹⁹

¹⁷Hartley, Hawkes, Henig and Mee, *Constantine the Great*, pp.206-7 no.191.

¹⁸C.F.Mawer, *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain. The small finds* (BAR Brit. Ser.243, 1995), pp.64 and 125 no D2, Br.6.

¹⁹Information G.Dannell.



Photograph (NVAT)

There is no reason to assume a liturgical use either for the Isle of Ely tazza or for this pot any more than for the Hoxne and Mildenhall spoons.

Possible evidence for an established Christian population in Eastern Britain comes from funerary cult. The cemeteries at Orton Waterville and at Ashton for example were laid out neatly and oriented East -West in the fashion of Christian graves.²⁰ However, in Eastern Britain as elsewhere in the province, we should be hesitant at seeing a widespread and universal Christian culture even within elite circles. The imagery of the Mildenhall Treasure is mainly Bacchic while neither the Hoxne nor the Mildenhall Treasure display Christian imagery. Moreover, the Thetford Treasure, also late Roman, is concerned exclusively with the cult of the god Faunus, given a number of epithets on the silver spoons in the assemblage.²¹ Although it is possible that the cult was suppressed at the end of the 4th century, but not before if coins of Magnus Maximus were found with it as reported, it is nevertheless likely that pagan cult lived on amongst the bulk of the population, especially when Rome ceased to exercise political control in Britain in the first decade of the 5th century. Very possibly it became conflated with the cults of incoming pagan Anglo-Saxons and was only eradicated or more accurately became submerged or absorbed as 'folkloristic elements' within Christianity subsequent to the Augustinian mission at the very end of the 6th century, during the 'Conversion period' in the following century.

²⁰Upex, *The Romans in the East of England*, p.233, fig.76.

²¹ C. Johns and T. Potter, *The Thetford Treasure. Roman Jewellery and Silver*(British Museum 1983).

Acknowledgements with thanks

BM	Copyright - The Trustees of the British Museum
MAAC	Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge
NVAT	Nene Valley Archaeological Trust
NCMA	Copyright - Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery