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Review of Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500, by C. Thomas

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CHARLES THOMAS, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981. Pp. 408; 8 black-and-white plates and 60 maps and figures. \$35.

THIS GENERAL study will be compared to the long-established and still valuable *Christianity in Early Britain* by Hugh Williams, written in 1912. The most obvious point of comparison is the method the two writers used. Williams relied upon the few indigenous literary sources and thus had to portray the British church against the background of western, Roman Christianity; Thomas relies heavily upon archaeological material and thus portrays the British church per se with little reference to the continental background. Thomas does, however, presume his readers will be familiar with Williams's work or at least with its main points. The reason for the change in method is simple but decisive: the enormous amount of knowledge gained by archaeologists in the decades separating the two books, well documented in the large bibliography.

Thomas has produced a valuable book. Much of the archaeological research has been published only in technical and often very local journals, and no major effort had been previously made to integrate it with the information derived from the literary and toponomical evidence. Thomas has admirably adopted an interdisciplinary approach and manages to carry it off well.

He spends much of the book sorting and cataloguing his evidence, and it is immediately apparent how much archaeology has changed the picture since Williams's day, for example, how late in the period (fourth century) one must go to find buildings specifically intended as churches, and even then only two, at Silchester and Richborough, are certain.

Thomas argues that from a base in the southeast Christianity spread throughout Britain, putting paganism on the defensive and then on the decline. Initially an urban religion Christianity gained ascendancy on the great estates, whose owners practiced a mild syncretism, matching Christian and pagan motifs in the villas' decorations. The extent of the evangelization of the countryside remains uncertain. The Saxon invasions put a halt to this spread, but the continuity of Christianity remained unbroken and British. This insular church was indebted to the continent in several areas, but Thomas has significantly reduced foreign influence in favor of local practices. To cite one major example, there is simply no evidence for monasticism in Britain in this period, despite its overwhelming popularity (Martin of Tours, John Cassian, Jerome) in the western empire.

Thomas deserves credit for the many helpful visual aids — eight plates and sixty figures, including eighteen maps — which support his argument but, more importantly, enable the nonspecialist reader to see the complexities of early British history. Specialists have become accustomed to the fragmentary nature of the evidence and to the difficulty of drawing general conclusions, but even they must be impressed at how lucidly Thomas has presented the problems, even if many remain unsolved.

Although careful and competent, the book is often slow and didactic. Thomas likes to make modern analogies, which become distracting. He was also seduced by the siren of early British Christianity, the problems of Saint Patrick. He proposes plausible solutions, but difficulties remain. He has Patrick escape to Brittany, a reasonable sail of seventy-two hours, but when Patrick says he sailed for three days, he could just as easily have meant the biblical three days of Jesus in the tomb, and one should be careful about turning those three days (*triduum*) into seventy-two hours.

But these drawbacks should not dim the luster of Thomas's achievement. He has brought together a vast array of evidence and worked it into a coherent whole. He has clearly demonstrated the importance of archaeology for an understanding of the period and has pointed the way future research is likely to go. This detailed, well-documented study will not be replaced for some time.

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WARREN T. TREADGOLD, *The Nature of the "Bibliotheca" of Photius*. (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 18.) Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1980. Pp. xv, 206; frontispiece. \$20.

THIS BOOK is a substantially revised version of a Harvard dissertation. The text itself occupies pages 1–115; the rest of the book consists of tables and indexes, the first of which, an annotated table of the contents of the *Bibliotheca*, fills pages 117–68.

Treadgold rightly sets out to explain the composition of the *Bibliotheca* on the assumption that what Photius tells us on this subject may well be true, and if it can be reconciled with observed facts, it ought to be accepted as the truth. This is the correct attitude, and it should scarcely have been necessary to reassert it after the treatment of the problem given by K. Ziegler in Pauly-Wissowa. I do not say that in criticism of Treadgold; it is not his fault that common sense needs to be defended again. My principal reservation about his book is that, while a fresh presentation in English of the current state of research on an extremely important Byzantine text is acceptable, Treadgold does not add a great deal to existing knowledge and does not succeed in giving a definitive portrait of Photius as a scholar.

The main merit of the book in my opinion is that on two important questions it develops a line of argument suggested by the Swedish scholar T. Hägg, and does so with results which at least require serious attention. The first of these concerns the different nature of the second half of the *Bibliotheca*; it has for a long time been a puzzle that "codices" 234–80 seem to be rather different in character from those that precede. Treadgold thinks that they are in fact notes which Photius had made at an earlier date, and that Photius was too short of time to adapt them to the usual form of "codex," with the result that when he left on his embassy he had to give the material as it was to his secretary to copy out in unrevised form in the master copy of the book to be presented to his brother Tarasios. Treadgold's second suggestion concerns palaeographical facts. The manuscripts have a number of lacunae, some of them at the end of reviews, and it is reasonable to ask whether they can be explained by assuming that the secretary failed to complete the transcription of notes provided by Photius, a task to which he should have returned later. So far so good; but should one not press the argument a stage further? It seems to me that the secretary might well have failed to complete his task because the reason for its completion suddenly disappeared; in other words the embassy was called off at the last moment, and Photius, being either too busy or no longer feeling any urgency, never had his work completed. In this way the palaeographical evidence can be reconciled with an unconventional solution to the problem of the embassy, a solution which Treadgold does in fact mention on p. 26 in passing; he should have flirted with it a little longer.

As to the date of the embassy, Treadgold favours 845, while not excluding 855.