British Christian continuity in Anglo-Saxon England: the case of Sherborne/Lanprobi

Martin Grimmer

Abstract
A feature of recent work on early Anglo-Saxon England has been an emerging consensus that a substantial British population was subsumed under and persisted within Anglo-Saxon territorial boundaries as they expanded to the west and north. In such circumstances, it has been argued, British identity and culture continued within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. If there was a substantial British substrate, some evidence of their continued presence and influence should certainly be expected. The concept of continuity, however, is one fraught with problems concerning both its meaning and the evidence that would be necessary to establish such an eventuality. This is particularly the case in the ecclesiastical domain, where it is currently popular to assert that the Anglo-Saxon border kingdoms – Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria – were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries. The aim of this paper is to explore some of the difficulties associated with the term ‘continuity’ by examining the case of Sherborne, an early West Saxon monastery in Dorset, and the claim that it originated as a British community called Lanprobi.

A feature of recent work on early Anglo-Saxon England has been an emerging consensus that a substantial British population was subsumed under and persisted within Anglo-Saxon territorial boundaries as they expanded to the west and north.¹ In such circumstances, it has been argued

that British identity and culture continued within the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and indeed, if there was a substantial British substrate to the population of Anglo-Saxon England, some evidence of their continued presence and influence should on a priori grounds be expected. Many early medieval historians and archaeologists who study the transition from sub-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England have, therefore, become engaged in a love affair with this concept of ‘continuity’. This is particularly the case in the ecclesiastical domain, where it is currently popular to assert that the Anglo-Saxon border kingdoms – Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria – were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries. My aim in this paper is to explore some of the difficulties associated with the term ‘continuity’ by examining the case of Sherborne, an early West Saxon monastery in Dorset, and the claim that it originated as a British community called Lanprobi.

To start with some general points about the concept of continuity, there is no doubt that it is one of fundamental interest to scholars researching the transition from British to Anglo-Saxon control. Yet it is also one fraught with problems concerning both its meaning and the evidence that would be necessary to establish such an eventuality. Indeed, what does the term ‘continuity’ actually mean? Does it refer to the survival of people, or of institutions, or of culture? Does the Anglo-Saxon occupation of an earlier British site represent a clear transition from British to Anglo-Saxon possession or simply its re-use after a lapse of decades or even centuries? Does the survival of a British Celtic place-name imply the survival of a British enclave, or simply that there were Britons in the vicinity to pass on a name? Christopher Snyder asserts that the continuity issue is partly a semantic one, that continuity means different things to different scholars. John Blair similarly states that the question of continuity is often posed too starkly, without appreciation of what is


2 J Blair, ‘Churches in the early English landscape: social and cultural contexts’ 6-19 in Blair and Pyrah (eds), Church Archaeology at p 6.


actually meant. In addition to this, ‘genuine’ continuity needs to be distinguished from ‘created’ continuity. It must be recognised that visible representations of the past – such as buildings, monuments, walls and cemeteries – could actively be used by early medieval peoples in order to create an impression of longevity and tradition. This would be similar to the creation of genealogies and origin myths in order to invent a link between the present and some legitimating past.

For example, Anglo-Saxon minsters were often built on or in older Roman buildings, and it has been argued that by doing so, the Anglo-Saxon church was thus appropriating the Roman past in order to create an impression of continuity and venerability. Richard Bradley talks of the imagined or remote past being used as a ‘resource in the hands of the living’, for particular groups to establish their own unchallengeable position of dominance. He suggests that this practice was especially likely to occur during times of uncertainty and change, such as the early Anglo-Saxon period. This means that one must be aware of the deliberate and specious appropriation of the past to legitimise control over people, land and resources. Thus, the continued use of an older site by Anglo-Saxons might have multiple interpretations, in addition to a genuine link with the immediate British past.

As stated earlier, the question of continuity is particularly acute in the ecclesiastical domain, my focus in this paper. Religion can operate as a mechanism for creating and cementing a shared social identity, and once the Anglo-Saxons converted, the potential for cultural intercourse and influence

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6 Blair, ‘Anglo-Saxon minsters’, 242, states that ‘contemporaries, like ourselves, were capable of making deductions (right or wrong) from physical evidence’.
11 Williams, ‘Ancient landscapes and the dead’, 24. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to argue that the re-use of a Bronze Age barrow for the placing of Anglo-Saxon dead represented the survival of a sub-British cultural practice, although some understanding of the ancient sanctity of the site might be assumed.
with the Christian Britons would have been greatly increased.12 As stated, it is currently popular to assert that the West Saxon, Mercian and to a lesser extent Northumbrian kingdoms were exposed to a considerable degree of British ecclesiastical influence, especially on their western and northern margins, prior to the arrival of Roman and Irish/Columban missionaries.13 However, uncovering evidence for this putative contribution is not so straightforward. The siting of an early Anglo-Saxon church over or near some previous British or Romano-British site can often be verified, such as over a cemetery, a holy well, a Roman mausoleum, or some manner of curvilinear enclosure. Yet the meaning of such an occurrence is less clear. To demonstrate Christian continuity from British to Anglo-Saxon periods at any given site requires the enumeration of excavated phases of continued occupation and usage.14 Of more benefit than archaeological evidence would be evidence for the continued veneration of a British saint by the Anglo-Saxon church, such as seems to have occurred with Saints Alban and Ninian,15 or evidence for the perpetuation of British Christian communities, as may be indicated by Anglo-Saxon place-names containing the eccles-element.16 The perpetuation of a Celtic dedication from before the Anglo-

13 For example, S Bassett, ‘Church and diocese in the West Midlands: the transition from British to Anglo-Saxon control’ 13-40 in Blair and Sharpe (eds), Pastoral Care Before the Parish; idem, ‘Medieval ecclesiastical organisation in the vicinity of Wroxeter and its British antecedents’, Journal of the British Archaeological Association 145 (1992) 1-28; Blair, ‘Anglo-Saxon minsters’, 265; idem, ‘Churches in the early English landscape’, 6; P H Hase, ‘The church in the Wessex heartlands’, 47-81 in M Aston and C Lewis (eds), The Medieval Landscape of Wessex (Oxford, 1994) at p 51; Higham, Kingdom of Northumbria, 101; idem, ‘Britons in northern England’, 12; Sims-Williams, Religion and Literature, 78-79; Smith, ‘Origins and development of Christianity’, 24-25; Thomas, Christianity in Roman Britain, 266.
14 This is cogently explained by Blair, ‘Churches in the early English landscape’, 7.
16 Eccles is a place-name element which appears either by itself or as a compound (eg Eccleshill, Ecclesfield, Eaglesfield, and Exley). Its original source is the Latin ecclesia, but it is generally accepted as having been adopted into Anglo-Saxon usage via the British egles, and not directly from the Latin. The meaning of the term as it was used in post-Roman Britain is a matter of some debate, specifically with regard to whether it referred to a British church or simply to a community of British Christians. On the identification and meaning of eccles-names, see K Cameron, ‘Eccles in English place-names’ 87-92 in M W Barley and R P C
Saxon conquest of a British region would imply the continuation of a church institution, not just the consecutive use of the same site. More useful again would be evidence for British involvement in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon immigrants.

For continuity to be established, some thought must also be given to what would actually have been passed on from British to Anglo-Saxon periods. It needs to be determined, therefore, at least to some degree, what existed before the Anglo-Saxons arrived. And this is certainly part of the problem with assertions of British Christian continuity: there is often no clear enunciation of what was continued because outside the evidence of Gildas and Patrick, we know very little about sub-Roman Christianity and therefore very little about what was actually there to be passed on. In addition, British Christian structures are very difficult to identify: possible church sites often share features with pagan temples; in some areas there are no church buildings surviving at all from the sub-Roman period, probably due to a preference for timber construction, and Christian cemeteries are notoriously difficult to date except by the radio-carbon method. Thus, there are obstacles to even establishing simple locational continuity.

In order to illustrate some of the challenges associated with trying to establish continuity, the case of Sherborne and Lanprobi will now be considered. The circumstances surrounding the foundation and early history of the West Saxon monastery of Sherborne in Dorset are, predictably, obscure. According to Bede, the West Saxon diocese was divided into two on the death of Bishop Hædde in 705; Aldhelm became the bishop of the new western diocese, and Daniel bishop of the eastern diocese. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Aldhelm’s bishopric is referred to as being ‘west of the wood’ or ‘west of Selwood’. Selwood Forest stood...
to the north-east of Sherborne on the western border of current-day Wiltshire, and may once have acted as a barrier into Somerset and Dorset. William of Malmesbury, writing in the first half of the twelfth century, says that the seat of the new western diocese was Sherborne, where Aldhelm built ‘a magnificent cathedral’, which was still standing in William’s time.22 Apart from these references, however, there is little documentary evidence concerning the establishment of Sherborne, and William’s statement is the earliest surviving reference to a cathedral church there.23 Few early charters have survived, due in part to the reorganisation and division of the Sherborne-based diocese in the early tenth century (c 909), and the removal of the see of Sherborne to Salisbury in the 1070s.24 No obvious foundation charter exists.25 Despite this lack of early information, it has been claimed that Sherborne could well have had a pre-Saxon origin with some level of continuity existing between British and West Saxon communities.26

The claim for a pre-Saxon British community at Sherborne rests upon a single reference to a grant by King Cenwalh (642-72) in a later list of royal benefactors of Sherborne and the lands which they granted.27 This list survives in a late fourteenth-century manuscript – one of the Cottonian manuscripts28 – although it appears to have been copied from an earlier list

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26 For example, K Barker, ‘The early history of Sherborne’ 77-116 in S Pearce (ed), The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland (Oxford, 1982) 78; Costen, Origins of Somerset, 78; R Faith, The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship (London, 1997) 19; also Hase, ‘The church in the Wessex heartlands’, 50, who asserts that ‘there can be little doubt that Sherborne was a major ecclesiastical centre well before Aldhelm’s date’.


28 British Library MS Cotton Faustina A.ii. See the discussion in O’Donovan, Charters of Sherborne, xx, xliii-xliv.
probably compiled some time after 1035, the date of the latest grant mentioned.\textsuperscript{29} Cenwalh’s donation heads the list, in which he is said to have granted 100 hides at a location called Lanprobi.\textsuperscript{30} The lann- element in the name indicates a British churchyard or sacred enclosure,\textsuperscript{31} and, combined with the name of a putatively early saint, Lanprobi appears to translate as the ‘churchyard (or monastery) of Probus’. What is significant about this grant is that it is described with a British place-name which seems to imply the existence of a British Christian community venerating a St Probus within the vicinity of Sherborne prior to the establishment of the West Saxon bishopric (Cenwalh was dead by the time of Aldhelm’s creation as bishop). Thus it is not surprising that it is used as evidence of British Christian continuity. Indeed, the British character of the name moved H P R Finberg in 1964 to suggest that Lanprobi may have been ‘the older British name of the monastic property on which the town was afterwards built’.\textsuperscript{32} Patrick Hase has similarly asserted that ‘there can be little doubt that Sherborne was a major ecclesiastical centre well before Aldhelm’s date’.\textsuperscript{33} A number of difficulties emerge, however, if Lanprobi is to be identified as the progenitor of the Saxon abbey.

To begin with, the actual site of Lanprobi as a possible British community at Sherborne has been somewhat controversial. If one were to

\textsuperscript{29} Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 243-249; H P R Finberg, *The Early Charters of Wessex* (Leicester, 1964) 155. The list is not written in chronological order. It will henceforth be referred to as the ‘Cottonian list’.

\textsuperscript{30} Cenwalh’s grant is recorded ‘Kenewalc rex dedit lanprobi de c hydis’ (Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 245; O’Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 81). The 100 hides itself appears to be rather too round and too large a figure to be genuine.

\textsuperscript{31} Lann is a Celtic place-name element which appears to have gone out of use at a relatively early date. It was certainly obsolete in Cornish by the fourteenth century. When it was first used in a Christian context in the south-west it probably meant ‘enclosure’, but later acquired the meanings of monastery, churchyard and enclosed cemetery; but not ‘church building’ as it did in Wales. Approximately fifty Cornish church sites (about twenty-five per cent of the total) have a name containing the lann- element; there are also fifty secular lann place-names. On the lann- element, see A Preston-Jones, ‘Decoding Cornish churchyards’ 105-124 in N Edwards and A Lane (eds), *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992) at pp 108, 115; L Mac Mathúna, ‘Observations on Irish lann “(piece of) land: (church) building” and compounds’, *Ériu* 48 (1997) 153-60; L Olson, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall* (Woodbridge, 1989) 3; O J Padel, ‘Cornish names of Parish churches’, *Cornish Studies* 4/5 (1976-77) 15-27; S Pearce, *The Kingdom of Dumnonia - Studies in History and Tradition in South Western Britain AD 350-1150* (Cornwall, 1978) 73, 135.


\textsuperscript{33} Hase, ‘The church in the Wessex heartlands’, 50.
suppose continuity from British to Anglo-Saxon communities, the logical place to look would be the site of the West Saxon abbey. However, it is now generally accepted that if a British community existed in the vicinity, it should be located at the hill where the Norman castle stands, about one kilometre away to the east of the abbey. The case for this location primarily rests on the evidence of later papal bulls. In a bull of Pope Eugenius III, dated 1145, a ‘Propeschirche’ – which, accepting certain linguistic problems, may be a later rendering of ‘Probus’s church’ – is mentioned among the possessions of Sherborne. More illuminating is the bull of Pope Alexander III, dated to 1163, which mentions the ‘The church of St Mary Magdalene situated next to Sherborne castle with the chapels of St Michael and St Probus [ecclesiam sanctae Mariae Magdalenea sitam iuxta castrum Sherborne cum capellis sancti Michaelis et sancti Probi]’. This statement clearly tells of the existence of a dedication to St Probus, belonging to the church of St Mary Magdalene beside the castle. Further support for the castle location derives from the discovery of burials at the site, in levels earlier than that of the Norman castle, perhaps as early as the seventh century. Thus, the castle hill, rather than the Saxon abbey, emerges as the most probable the site of Lanprobi, and so there does not


35 L Keen, ‘The towns of Dorset’ 203-247 in J Haslam (ed), Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England (Chichester, 1984) at p 211; O’Donovan, Charters of Sherborne, 85. As this reference occurs after the c 909 division of the diocese, it can be reasonably assumed that Propeschirche was located within Dorset, although the bull provides no definitive geographical indicator. Propeschirche is linked in the bull with an area of land called ‘Stocland cum silvis et pratis et cum duobus molendinis’, that is, with woods and fields and two mills. A ‘Stockland’ is mentioned in a charter of King Æthelred dated to 998, which sanctioned the refoundation of the minster at Sherborne, and the name appears in various other medieval and early modern references to the tenants and manor of Sherborne (see Keen, ‘The towns of Dorset’, 211-212). By association, Propeschirche could be located in the vicinity of the town. This eventuality is discussed by O’Donovan, Charters of Sherborne, 86.


seem to be a scenario of re-use of the same site.\textsuperscript{39} The castle site is also consistent with the evidence of other British settlements in the region that are found on hill-sites, such as Glastonbury Tor, Congresbury, Cannington and Lamyatt Beacon (Somerset).\textsuperscript{40}

Very little information exists about the figure of Probus which might be used to assist in the identification of the Lanprobi site, or in the verification of a link with the dedication referred to in the papal bulls. There is no surviving Life or oral tradition concerning Probus which might shed more light on the origin of the saint, and the name is otherwise unknown in Wales and Brittany.\textsuperscript{41} The earliest surviving reference to a British saint bearing this, or a similar, name is to a ‘Propus’, recorded in a tenth-century list of Cornish parochial saints.\textsuperscript{42} The name appears next in a Cornish place-name in Domesday Book – Sanctus Probus/Sancti Probi,

\textsuperscript{39} K Barker, ‘The early Christian topography of Sherborne’, \textit{Antiquity} 54 (1980) 229-231, using topographical evidence of a D-shaped enclosure (potentially a \textit{lann}), had argued for a town site for Lanprobi which overlapped with the grounds of the Saxon abbey. However, her approach is generally not supported. Hinton, ‘Topography of Sherborne’, 222-223, for example, stated that the size of Barker’s proposed enclosure was over three times that of analogous religious enclosures, and that its identification primarily rests on an estate map of 1733. See also the following who do not support Barker: Blair, ‘Sherborne’, 418; T A Hall, \textit{Minster Churches in the Dorset Landscape} (Oxford, 2000) 53; Keen, ‘Topography of Sherborne, Dorset’, 132-134; Yorke, \textit{Wessex}, 178. In a more recent work, Barker, ‘Sherborne in Dorset’, 5, allowed that ‘the implication [is] that the castle mound itself is Lanprobi. There is no evidence to the contrary, merely that at present the topographical material from the town is more striking …’. She remains a lone voice in championing the town site.

\textsuperscript{40} P Rahtz, ‘Pagans and Christians by the Severn Sea’ 3-37 in L Abrams and J P Carley (eds), \textit{The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey} (Woodbridge, 1991) at p 33; Snyder, \textit{Age of Tyrants}, 178-9, 202-8.

\textsuperscript{41} The name Probus was included as ‘Saint Mellanus Probus, Bishop and Confessor’, in Nicholas Roscarrock’s \textit{Lives of the Saints: Cornwall and Devon}, written in the 1610s, as ‘perhaps’ being the patron of Probus Church in Cornwall. But no further information was included. See \textit{Nicholas Roscarrock’s Lives of the Saints: Cornwall and Devon} ed N Orme (Exeter, 1992) 88, 152-3.

\textsuperscript{42} This list is contained in the \textit{Vatican codex Reginensis Latinus 191}. See B L Olson and O J Padel, ‘A tenth-century list of Cornish parochial saints’, \textit{Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies} 12 (1986) 33-71. The list contains 48 Brittonic or plausibly Brittonic names, of which 21 are certainly those of patron saints of Cornish churches, and a further 12 are known to be figures associated with the British Celtic world. Propus appears twenty-fourth on the list. The list was transcribed on one of the three bifolia (folio ii) used as the binding for a collection of ecclesiastical texts at the monastery of Saint Remi at Rheims, where the sheets appear to have been used without consideration for their contents. The list is in Insular minuscule, dated to c 900 at the earliest, though it may have been written later in the tenth century, possibly by a Breton scribe who had returned from a sojourn in Britain, or by a Cornish scribe living in Brittany.
vernacular Lanbrabois/Lanbrebois – now simply called Probus. The vernacular forms in Domesday are what one would expect given the process of lenition, whereby ‘p’ would change to ‘b’ after lann. In this regard, the ‘p’ in Lanprobi, as transcribed in the Cottonian list, is somewhat surprising. Indeed, the name Lanprobi itself is an odd combination of elements, that almost looks as though the Cornish lann has been combined with the Latin genitive of Probus. This in turn raises questions as to whether the name Probus in this particular case refers to a Latin or a Celtic figure. It is declined in Latin references as a Latin name, and indeed, there were non-Celtic saints called Probus. However, it is also the case that when Latin names were adapted into Brittonic, the case-endings were dropped. So Lanprobi is not consistent in form with other lann-names that contain a non-Celtic saint – such as Llanhernin (St Iserninus), Llanfair (St Mary), and Llanfihangel (St Michael) – which do not decline the name. But if Probus was Celtic, it is then curious that the Cottonian scribe did not use a form similar to the Lanbrabois/Lanbrebois in Domesday Book, which would clearly indicate a Celtic provenance for the name. It becomes a distinct possibility that Lanprobi is a corrupted form of the original name, which might have been either Latin or Brittonic, or which might have been erroneously given a Latin genitive case-ending by the Cottonian scribe.

Accordingly, the identification of Lanprobi as the name of a possible pre-Saxon British monastery rests almost entirely on the lann-element. The use of this element to name British Christian sites can only have occurred in the south-west prior to the replacement of British speech with Old English, and only until such a time as there were indeed new sites

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43 Barker, ‘Early history of Sherborne’, 78; Olson, Early Monasteries in Cornwall, 88; Pearce, Kingdom of Dumnonia, 83. There are further references to Lanbrobes in 1302; Seynt Probus, 1466; Lambrobus, c 1500 and 1621. See Olson and Padel, ‘Cornish parochial saints’, 51-52; Padel, ‘Cornish names of Parish churches’, 17.

44 Lenition is where the initial letters of words are changed by what precedes them in Celtic languages. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me this linguistic process.

45 For example, two bishops of Ravenna were called Probus (the first in the third or fourth century; the second in the fifth century), as was a monk of Agaune (early sixth century). See Bollandists (ed), Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina, 2 Vols (Brussels, 1898-1901; Novum Supplementum, ed H Fros, 1986) 6944-6946. Note also Probus of Verona, Acta Sanctorum, I (1-15), 357.

46 Olson, Early Monasteries in Cornwall, 88 note 168.


48 Olson and Padel, ‘Cornish parochial saints’, 51, argue that Probus may be a Latinised form of a lost Old Cornish name, such as Probuis. Though this name is not recorded anywhere, they offer it as having hypothetically existed based on the vernacular forms in Domesday Book.
to be named. Hence, while *lann* appears to be used in names in Cornwall until the end of the eleventh century, after which time there were few new public churches founded, its use east of the Tamar in Devon, Somerset and Dorset must have ceased at an earlier date concomitant with the West Saxon advance. Lanprobi could, therefore, have been named prior to the West Saxon take-over of Dorset in the second half of the seventh century, and thus prior to the end of Cenwalh’s reign in 672. Onomastically, at least, the use of *lann* represents positive evidence for the existence of a British community of Lanprobi.

If we examine the charter itself from which the name derives, its authenticity is difficult to establish. Heather Edwards quite reasonably states that an eleventh-century list of charters, the majority of which have been lost in the original, might include a proportion of fabrications or interpolations. Mary O’Donovan similarly questions the veracity of a reference that is not recorded until such a late date. Nonetheless, it can be argued that many of the early charters in the Cottonian list may be genuine. For instance, it is unlikely that there would have been any motivation in the eleventh century to fabricate charters for estates outside of Dorset, given that after the division of the diocese c 909, Sherborne’s endowment was probably restricted to lands within Dorset. Thus, grants recorded in the Cottonian list of lands in Cornwall, Devon, Wiltshire and Somerset are not likely to have been fabricated as there would have been little reason for doing this. Other charters on the Cottonian list are associated with vague place-names or describe grants in vague terms often in relation to nearby rivers, such that estates cannot be matched with those recorded later. On general grounds, this feature is characteristic of authentic early West Saxon charters and not of forgeries. Thus, the list itself is unlikely to have been a complete fabrication.

Moreover, the fact that Lanprobi contains a British place-name element also indicates that the grant may be genuine. This is more likely to have occurred in an authentic charter than in a later forgery, as a British name for an estate would certainly carry less weight in an English charter, especially if it could not be matched with a contemporary estate name.

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49 Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 73.
51 O’Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 87. She also notes (xxi, 84) that there is no mention of Lanprobi in the version of the list of benefactors preserved in the Sherborne Missal of c 1396-1407.
Thus, *Lanprobi* would have been a doubtful choice by a forger.\textsuperscript{54} Heather Edwards actually considers the *Lanprobi* charter to be the foundation charter of the Saxon monastery, the original of which was perhaps discarded at some later point, possibly because the monks could no longer identify the estate.\textsuperscript{55} It might indeed be more than coincidence that Cenwalh, the name of the donor, is one of the West Saxon names that contains the *wealh*- element. It is rather apt having a king called the ‘bold Briton’ donating an estate described with a British name.

But there is no escaping the problem that the record of the charter is very distant from the seventh century. This need not invalidate it as a source of evidence, but it nevertheless reveals nothing of what the name or putative monastery of *Lanprobi* might have represented. If there was a British Celtic monastery near Sherborne, it is simply impossible to know of its condition at the time the Saxon monastery was established. *Lanprobi* may have been a thriving community, from which land may have been appropriated by the West Saxon church,\textsuperscript{56} or it may have been an abandoned hill-top site that was remembered amongst the local population as having been sanctified at some earlier time.\textsuperscript{57} The fact that a chapel dedicated to St Probus is documented in the twelfth century may indicate that a tradition of *Lanprobi* enjoyed some continuity, not having been entirely suppressed by the West Saxons; the similarity in the names is indeed striking.\textsuperscript{58} But it is also possible that the veneration of Probus was

\textsuperscript{54} This measure of authenticity is compromised to a certain extent by the fact that Cenwalh is the benefactor. His name is attached to several forged charters, from Sherborne, Glastonbury and Winchester (Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 20-23, 131-132, 240-241) and thus his reputation is, by association, somewhat tainted. It is conceivable, nevertheless, that his name was used in these forgeries because he was remembered as a monastic founder, although this point should not be pressed too far (Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 110). Indeed, Cenwalh was listed first in the *Sherborne Missal* medallions as a patron of Sherborne. See O’Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, xlv.

\textsuperscript{55} Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 251.

\textsuperscript{56} As suggested by Hall, *Minster Churches in the Dorset Landscape*, 11. She also posits that this may have been the reason for the choice of Sherborne as Aldhelm’s see, namely, that there was estate land to be had.

\textsuperscript{57} Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 253, states that the site may have consisted only of ‘derelict buildings’. See also Keen, ‘Topography of Sherborne, Dorset’, 134.

\textsuperscript{58} Hinton, ‘Topography of Sherborne’, 223. O’Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 88, raises the question of why someone would bother to forge a charter of privileges to Sherborne from Cenwalh (see Edwards, *Early West Saxon Charters*, 240-241), if there really was a genuine grant of land from the king as embodied in the *Lanprobi* charter: ‘could the link between the British Lanprobi and the Saxon Sherborne foundation have been forgotten by the eleventh and twelfth centuries?’
introduced into Dorset from Cornwall in the tenth century or later, though the *lann-* element does imply an earlier, rather than later, date.

If the presumption is accepted that Probus was venerated in some form in the vicinity of Sherborne, it must also be with the understanding that the site of this British community of *Lanprobi* was not that of the subsequent Saxon abbey. The extent of any ‘continuity’ under such conditions is, therefore, open to debate. There is little question, when Aldhelm assumed the bishopric in 705, that there was an existing foundation at Sherborne; otherwise, it is unlikely that it would have been considered a suitable location for his see. Cenwalh’s push as far as the River Parrett, recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 658, meant that he probably came into possession of territory in western Dorset, and so he may have chosen to establish a West Saxon community there to minister to the region. But unless one is prepared to accept the possibility of a multi-focal ecclesiastical centre – with Britons on the castle hill and West Saxons in the valley – it appears that the Saxon monastery itself was a new foundation, built on a new site, and accordingly was described with the English stream-name Sherborne.

The case of Sherborne and *Lanprobi* thus provides a good demonstration of some of the problems associated with trying to establish British Christian continuity in Anglo-Saxon England. The evidence is indeed tantalising, but it is ambiguous; in the case of the *Lanprobi* charter, very late, and there is no way of knowing what the name *Lanprobi* would actually have represented on the ground. For the field of continuity studies to advance, there needs to be more specificity in the literature concerning what the term means and what degree of continuity is being investigated in any particular instance. The continued use of a Christian site or the late survival of a dedication, while being more than just ‘background noise’, may have multiple interpretations, and this needs to be appreciated. Henry Loyn, writing in 1962, stated that ‘There is a need … to guard against a modern tendency to look for Celts under every stone’.

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59 Kings such as Æthelstan, as well as many in the later Norman nobility, maintained an interest in saints and their relics, and monasteries dedicated to Cornish, Welsh and Breton saints were established from the tenth century in Devon, Somerset and Dorset. In c 933, for example, Æthelstan founded the monastery at Milton Abbas in Dorset, dedicated to the saints Michael, Mary, Branwalader and Samson. See Pearce, *Kingdom of Dumnonia*, 124-126.

60 O’Donovan, *Charters of Sherborne*, 87.


attempting to demonstrate British Christian continuity in Anglo-Saxon England, this is a warning that is as pertinent today as it was then.