

Aust (Gloucestershire) and Myths of Rome's Second *Augusta* Legion and St Augustine's 'Oak' Conference

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Introduction

Aust in Gloucestershire has long attracted speculation over the origin of its name. The two favoured hypotheses offer an alternative: either (a) this minor ferry terminus with its settlement was named by (or after) the Second *Augusta* Legion of the Roman army which, stationed in full strength at *Isca*-Caerleon between *c.* 78 AD and the 3rd century, would have regularly crossed the Severn estuary from Sedbury to Aust (*Augusta* the claimed origin of the place-name) in order to access the main *Abona* (Sea Mills) to *Glevum* (Gloucester) artery; or (b) was named in memory of the Roman churchman St Augustine (in the later Middle Ages popularly contracted to 'Austin') of Canterbury who, in 603 AD (traditional date), held a conference allegedly at or hard by Aust, beneath a landmark oak tree, with leaders of the Christian Church of the autonomous British kingdom nearest to the recently converted Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Kent.¹ The object of Augustine's conference was to bring about uniformity of practice between the indigenous church of post-Roman Britain and the historic Christian church established by St Peter in the ancient capital of the Roman world. The major subjects of dispute were the British dating of Easter and the form of the baptismal rite (both, the Roman Church urged, should be Roman) and, in addition, Augustine required that the British, although understandably reluctant, should undertake the evangelisation of the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders of their land. The conference ended in failure.

Whereas epigraphy and other contemporary evidence confirm the period of the Second Legion's occupation of Caerleon, the earliest reference to Augustine's meeting is found, more than a century after the event, in the work of the historian Bede. The monk of Jarrow made no mention of Aust or any other known location but simply recorded the fact that the conference took place with 'bishops and teachers of the British kingdom nearest to Kent ... at a place which is still called in English *Augustinaes Ac*, that is Augustine's oak, on the borders [as they stood when Bede was writing, *c.* 730 AD] of the Hwicce and the West Saxons' (Fig. 1). Since important matters of church authority and practice raised by the Roman party were such as could not be settled without wider suffrage, the British asked that 'a conference for a second time' should be held with more of their brethren present. This was conceded. However, the reliability of a linguistic connection of the place-name 'Aust' with either the honorific title of the Second *Augusta* Legion or the saint's name Augustine appears suspect upon closer philological examination of the evidence. The object of this article is to examine both the linguistic and the historical evidence and provide a considered alternative for the location of the 'Oak' conference.

1. M.G. Fulford, *The Second Augustan Legion in the West of Britain* (National Museums and Galleries of Wales, Cardiff, 1966). Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. B. Colgrave, eds. J. McClure and R. Collins (Oxford and New York, 1994), II, 2.

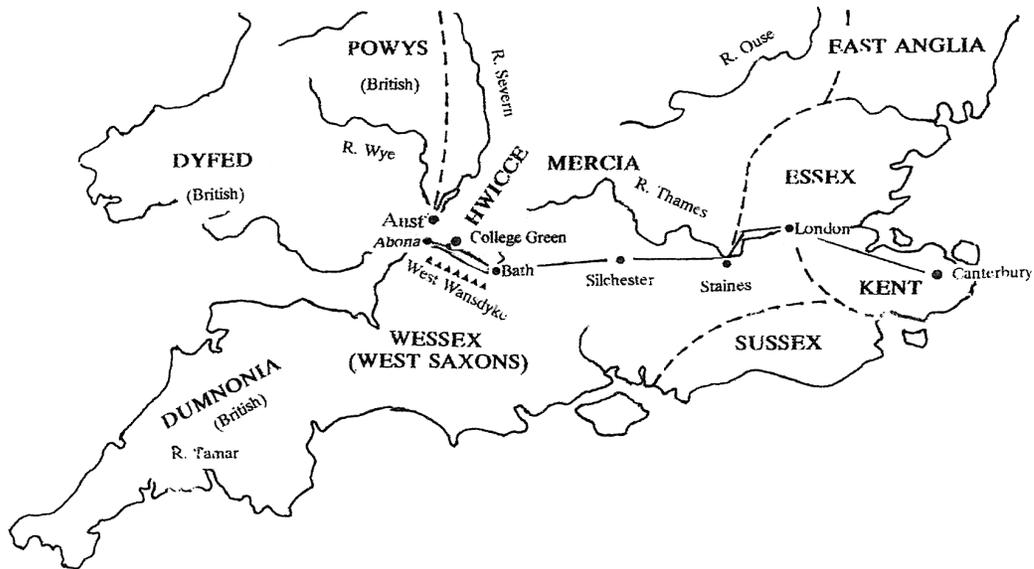


Fig. 1. The borders of the Hwicce and the West Saxons at the time of Bede *c.* 730 AD.

The Linguistic Evidence

This list gathers a selection of diagnostic citations of the name of Aust in chronological order from the earliest times, derived, unless otherwise stated, from A.H. Smith, *The Place-names of Gloucestershire* and A.L.F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*.² Issues raised by the citations are treated more fully below in *Preliminary Linguistic Discussion* and other sections:

1. **Aetaustin** i.e. **aet Austin** (691–2 AD). In brief, this apparently early rendering of the Gloucestershire place-name has no demonstrable linguistic connection with the non-inflected Middle English name ‘Austin’, an 11th- or 12th-century contracted or popular form of ‘Augustine’ as in ‘St Austin’ or ‘Austin Friars’, and therefore no connection with the location of the saint’s historic ‘Oak’ conference with the British Church in 603 AD. The matter is treated below in *Preliminary Linguistic Discussion* and elsewhere.
 2. **Augustinaes Āc** (Bede *Historia Ecclesiastica* II.2, *c.* AD 730), ‘Augustine’s Oak’. For comment, see below under *Aust*, *Bede and the Location of Augustine’s Oak Conference*.
 3. **aet Austan/to Austan** (794 AD). As in 1, there is no viable linguistic connection between the manuscript’s oblique form *Austan* and the later medieval contracted form ‘Austin’ from ‘Augustine’. See *Preliminary Linguistic Discussion* below.
2. A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, III, IV (Cambridge, 1964–5); A.L.F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979). Further sources in A.D. Mills, *A Linguistic Study of Gloucestershire Place-Names* (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1960) and *English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1991). For ‘Aust Cliffe’, the entry of 1546 is taken from Leland’s *Itinerary*, in J. Latimer, ‘Leland in Gloucestershire’, *Trans. BGAS*, 14 (1889–90), p. 245: ‘There be fewe notable Buildinges on Severne betwixt Gloucester and Aust Cliffe where the Ferry is over Severne into the Forrest of Dene ... A[t] 2. Miles lower Severne is at a full Sea a[t] 2 Miles and an half over, and at Aust Cliffe 2. good Miles over’.

4. **Agustines Aac** (*Old English Bede*, II.2, c. 890 AD), ‘Augustine’s Oak’. For comment, see below under *Aust*, *Bede and the Location of Augustine’s Oak Conference*.
5. **Austanclif** (979 X 997 AD), ‘Aust Cliff’. For further comment on the morphology of *Austan* see 3 above. The suffixal form *clif* refers to the dominating physical feature near the settlement which rises 42 m above OD overlooking the Mouth of the Severn, from which the first Severn Bridge now springs.
6. **Austreclive** (1086), ‘Aust Cliff’ as for 5 above. The apparently deviant form *Austre* is discussed below.
7. **Augusta** (c. 1105). An early 12th-century learned Latin reconstruction of *Auste*. Its implications are discussed below.
8. **Austeclive** (1221), ‘Aust Cliff’ as for 5 and 6 above. Recorded here in the Middle English phase of the language, the form *Auste*, with its archaic final vowel, reflects the weakening of the case system at this stage of the development of the language, when inflections were labile.
9. **Austinespulle** (1274), ‘Austin’s Pill or Pool’. See discussion below.
10. **Aust Cliffe** (1546). John Leland, *The Itinerary*. The modern form ‘Aust’ appears here for the first time.
11. **Auston Common** (1777), ‘Aust Common’. Recorded in the late 18th century, but ancient, the form with final syllable *-on* is demotic, perhaps reflecting the fossilised O.E. oblique case-ending (sing.) *-an* (see 3 and 5 above).
12. **Asnum Copse** (1830), ‘Aust copse’. Recorded in the early 19th century by Ordnance Survey, the broad dialectal features of its form may not have been professionally well transcribed. Again, a fossilised O.E. oblique case-ending (sing.), *-an*, may account for the final syllable (see 3, 5 and 11 above).

Preliminary Linguistic Discussion

With reference to citation 1 **Aetaustin**, i.e. **aet Austin** (691–2 AD). Taken at face value, ‘the name’ of the settlement is not *Austin* but *Auste*, i.e. the nominative case of the Old English (O.E.) ‘weak’ noun given here in its ‘oblique’ form. The Old English word (place-name) *Auste* simply follows the normal grammatical rule of the language at that time, which governs nouns that are preceded by a preposition (here *aet* ‘at’): i.e. a ‘case’ ending (here ‘dative’ case) modifies the noun. This ending for Old English weak nouns is generally characterised by *Vowel + n*. However, there may be scribal tampering in this particular citation, since the chronological list assembled here discloses that majority usage during the Old English period, when noun declension was a normal feature of the language (between entries 3 **Austan/to Austan** of 794 AD and 5 **Austanclif** of 979 X 997 AD), preferred *Austan* rather than *Austin*, which would give nominative case *Austa*. *Austa*, in fact, displays the regular morphology of an Old English masculine weak noun, and it would be correct to assert that ‘Austa’ was the settlement’s name in the early medieval period. The entry ‘(aet) Austin’, indeed, is suspect. It appears uniquely in a 17th-century transcription of the original Old English MS, Harley 4660 (Sawyer [1968] 77), and may well be a hypercorrection (final *-in* for *-an*), reflecting the 17th-century clerk’s own view, shared by many, that Aust had been the location of St *Austin’s* (Augustine’s) ‘Oak’ conference. To recapitulate, from a philological point of view, this Gloucestershire place-name, Aust, has no connection whatever with the non-inflected Middle English ‘Austin’, an 11th- or 12th-century contracted or popular form of ‘Augustine’ as in ‘St Austin’ and ‘Austin Friars’.

Passing over the chronologically closely-stacked Bedean entries at 2 and 4 above, which indicate the syllabic robustness of the inflected Old English language and the unlikelihood of Latin ‘Augustinus’ slipping to ‘Austin’ in this period, the first impression of the forms of the toponym,

once the stable period of Old English is left behind, is one of expected change and inconsistency. For example, the irregular outcomes *-re*, *-on*, *-um*, of the written oblique forms of the O.E. weak nouns seen in 6 *Austre*, 11 *Auston* and 12 *Asnum*, are not unexpected. These are demotic forms with fossilised case-endings, nothing more. The anomaly *Austre[clive]* at 6, with its interpolated [r], is an interesting variation which appears in the *Domesday Book* (Gloucestershire, Land of the Church at Worcester, Brentry Hundred). The origin is not immediately clear but the form may have been a scribal misreading of a more plausible **Austne*, or else a derivation from O.E. *eostre* ‘sheepfold’ might be suggested, in reference to the main economic activity on Aust Cliff itself. Such is the formation, for example, of the place-name ‘Austerfield’ in south Yorkshire, which derives from O.E. *eostre* + *feld* ‘sheepfold in open land’, recorded there in 715 AD. Common linguistic ‘contamination’ of south Gloucestershire’s *Austa/Auste* by contemporary usage of O.E. *eostre* amongst the small working population of the Aust area might well have produced *Austre*.

The linguistic picture is also complicated by the intrusion of inappropriate learned forms from what can only be described as regional Augustan or Augustinian mythologising: for example (i) the form *Augusta* (c. 1105) at 7 is an arbitrary and spurious Latin reconstruction of ‘Aust’ (no such Latin name for Aust ever existed), intended to suggest either Roman legionary origins or a connection to the life and work of [*Sanctus*] *Augustinus*; (ii) the formation *Austinespulle* (1274) at 9 (Mod.E. ‘Austin’s Pill or Pool’) is again a naked hypercorrection based not on O.E. forms of ‘Aust’ above (*Austa* later *Auste*) but on the popular medieval form ‘Austin’ < ‘Augustine’, referring to St Augustine of Canterbury and his alleged presence here at the ‘Oak’ conference in 603 AD. Certain other problems raised here will be addressed below in more detail.

Aust and the Second Augusta Legion

The first of the two traditions concerning the origins of the toponym ‘Aust’ proposes that the Roman army’s Second Legion, based at *Isca*-Caerleon, directly or indirectly bestowed their honorific title *Augusta* on the ferry terminus now known as Aust. Situated on the eastern shore of the Severn estuary, about seven miles north of the mouth of the river Avon, Aust was one of the two landings for commercial and military crossings of the estuary exploited by the iron industry and the legion from the harbour at Sudbrook, with its small fort. For the legion, Aust provided the shortest route via the nearby major Roman road (Margary no. 541) northwards to the *colonia* and garrison of Gloucester (*Glevum*), and southwards to Sea Mills (*Abona*). From Sea Mills on the Avon, direct access could be gained to the more important Roman road (Margary no. 54) to Bath (*Aquae Sulis*), Silchester (*Calleva*) and London.³ A ferry crossing, known in later history as the Old Passage, also existed between Aust and the mouth of the river Wye near Chepstow, where in Roman times a small fort was situated, probably manned by a detachment of the Second *Augusta* Legion also. Popular opinion declares that the Second Legion itself, or civilian influence, transposed the honorary imperial title ‘Augusta’ to the landing-place beneath Aust Cliff, providing a name reminiscent of Aosta (*Civitas Augusta Praetoria*) in Cisalpine Gaul in northern Italy, Autun (*Civitas Augustodunum*) in *Gallia Lugdunensis*, Augsburg (*Civitas Augusta Vindelicorum*) in *Germania Superior* and other towns throughout the Roman Empire.

Aust and Romano-British Topography

The place-name phenomenology of early medieval England, at its interface with post-Roman British relics, is notoriously littered with errors, tautologies and other inconsistencies of

3. I.D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (London, 1973).

apprehension, translation and transcription.⁴ Both the form and the origin of the place-name 'Aust' are problematical. For example, as regards the form, those responsible for drawing up the citations from the late 10th century onwards gave the settlement's name in the compound forms 'Aust Cliff' (at 5, 6 and 8), and 'Aust Pill/Pool' (at 9). Far from being a monothematic form, 'Aust' of the earliest entries of 691–2 and 794 AD may represent the relic of a compound formation. This will be discussed later.

It is generally accepted that from early historical times Aust provided the regular eastern terminus of ferry passages from both the mouth of the Wye at Chepstow and from Sudbrook. Until the completion of the first road bridge in 1966, Aust's great cliff provided a conspicuous landmark on the east bank of the Severn for navigation in the difficult waters of the estuary. The cliff, extending for at least one kilometre and rising abruptly 42 m above OD, also offered, as T.W.J. Solley well put it, 'a commanding view ... across the Severn towards [Roman] Caerleon and Caerwent'.⁵ Equally, Solley might have added that, from the direction of civilised, built-up Roman Caerleon and Caerwent, Aust Cliff rose up dramatically against the horizon of the relatively uninhabited east bank of the Severn. In Late Iron Age and early Roman times a tutelary temple to watch over the small harbour and to greet the dawn may have crowned the summit of the cliff, a conclusion that can be drawn from the seven votive statuettes in bronze (of which one remains) recovered amongst Roman ware and coinage in debris beneath the cliff.⁶ In other words, Aust may have been named not by the people of the south Gloucestershire side of the estuary but by those of the more populous and culturally advanced western bank, who rejoiced to see the sun rise daily over the sacred rim of Aust Cliff as they loaded their ferry-craft with the ore and iron blooms of Dean for transport over the water to the jetty beneath it. From Aust the freight made its way northwards to the small ironworking settlements situated along the eastern Severn shore up to Oldbury-on-Severn.⁷ The perspective which defines Aust from the western shore of the Severn estuary has implications that will be examined later.

At first sight, the notion that the Second *Augusta* Legion may have lent their honorific to the ferry *statio* at Aust with its probable temple, is attractive. But such a stance must give pause. For example, it should be borne in mind that the divine honorific 'Augusta' would not have been granted casually in Roman times. The place-names in the Roman empire which have been quoted as similar to that of Aust are of locations that differ notably from the Gloucestershire settlement as to their size, their political importance and their economic significance. All the imperial examples cited above – Aosta, Autun, Augsburg – were substantial *civitates*, while others in France such as Aoste (dep. Isère) and Aouste-sur-Sye (dep. Drôme) have at least 2000 inhabitants. In founding and naming such towns, a formal ceremony would undoubtedly have taken place, presided over by provincial dignitaries of the state and of the priesthood (the *Seviri Augustales*). The sacred name of the divine Augustus was not carelessly handled or given away. It is more probable that naming a very minor ferry terminus *Augusta*, given the nature of rude legionaries, would have been an ironic, jocular baptism. Such a name for Aust never entered Roman documentation. Had it been

4. K.H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 245. M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past. Place-Names and the History of England* (Chichester, 1997), p. 92.

5. T.W. Solley, 'Roman Remains from the Severn Bridge Approach at Aust', *Trans. BGAS*, 85 (1966), p. 36.

6. *ibid.*, p. 38; B. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (London, 2005), p. 474.

7. A. Young, 'Wessex Water Oldbury-on-Severn to Aust Discharge Pipeline, South Gloucestershire: Archaeological Surveys and Excavations 2003–4', *Archaeology in the Severn Estuary*, 2006, 17 (2007), pp. 77–142. P. Maser, J. Jones and B. McGill, 'Romano-British Settlement and Land Use on the Avonmouth Levels: the evidence of the Pucklechurch to Seabank pipeline project', *Trans. BGAS*, 123 (2005), pp. 83–4 and Fig. 9.

an oral hypocorism, it is not likely to have survived the departure of the legions, to live on through the post-Roman and early medieval (Anglo-Saxon) periods. Even *Londinium*, the metropolis of late Roman Britain, soon shed or mislaid its 4th-century Roman honorific *Augusta* in the course of its history, as did Trier (*Augusta Treverorum*), the metropolis of the German frontier and imperial capital. In the interim between the departure of the Roman army with the administration in c. 410 AD and the arrival in south Gloucestershire of the *Gewissae* (West Saxons) from the upper Thames valley, in the last quarter of the 6th century, the original Roman or Romano-British place-name of what is now Aust would most likely have disappeared.

It was not that Aust had been even a small Roman town. Apart from possessing a promontory temple of earlier British origin, it was a minor Roman ferry-landing and nothing more, as the negative results of archaeology show. Without official Roman presence, there were no more large military units on the move across the Mouth of the Severn. Even the substantial, probably walled town and port of *Abona* at Sea Mills soon passed into oblivion. There was both a local and a wider bureaucratic loss of its Roman name, which is now only found in the 2nd-century *Antonine Itinerary* (effectively a Roman road-map) and, as far as is known, never alluded to thereafter.⁸

Recent archaeology shows that the ironworking settlements on the Severn shore, from Oldbury-on-Severn to Aust, ceased activity before c. 400 AD, indicating that the movement of iron ore from the mines of Dean to Aust by ferry had ceased also.⁹ What then of the commercial existence and *raison d'être* of Aust? The nearby Roman villa at Tockington, like that of Chesters on the Welsh shore, was also soon abandoned; the temple on the summit of Aust Cliff, following the fate of the temple to Mars-Nodens of the mining and mariner communities of Lydney, visible from Aust, would soon have fallen into desuetude and ruin. Even the Roman name of Lydney itself, a far more significant site than Aust, was lost. Economically, the ferry terminus at Aust must also have died, together with what very few and wretched stevedore families or agricultural workers had remained, taking with them Aust's Roman name (whatever that was). From c. 400 AD there was complete bureaucratic silence in the post-Roman world of western Britain until, nearly three centuries later in 691 or 692 AD, the king of the Mercians, Aethelred, recorded his grant to the church at Worcester of 30 *casati* of land at Henbury and 'at Aust' (*aetaustin*).

Place-names in history are fragile, particularly if the place is not a substantial settlement. At 1.6 km to the south-east of Aust, with its claimed Latin place-name, there survives the salt-marsh hamlet of Ingst on its low eminence. A Latin derivation of Ingst has also been offered, *angustiae* ('narrows', 'straits'), which is perhaps topographically apt, but would include it amongst a select handful of only five place-names (including Aust) in the British Isles, canvassed as surviving unmodified from the Roman period.¹⁰ It might be asked, what mythologies bound them together through the centuries, Roman higher education having mostly departed with the Roman administration in AD 410. Before that, was Aust perhaps Scylla and Ingst Charybdis, while an arm of the Severn estuary between them, before complete silting, played the Straits of Messina? Again, Roman irony, which might have briefly allowed Aust's baptism as 'Augusta', could hardly have continued to play a role after the Romans had left the stage. The attempt to claim not one but two Latin toponymic rarities, Aust and Ingst, lying geographically adjacent to each other, might give pause – even given Gloucestershire's extraordinary *Romanitas*.

The derivation of Ingst was proposed earlier by Hugh Smith as Brittonic **īmssī* (cf. Welsh *ynys*),

8. D.H. Higgins, *The History of the Bristol Region in the Roman Period* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association Pamphlet no. 115, 2005), pp. 9–10, 39.

9. Young, 'Wessex Water', p. 137.

10. R. Coates 'A surviving Latin place-name in Sussex: Firle' and 'Aust and Ingst, Gloucestershire', in R. Coates, A. Breeze and D. Horovitz, *Celtic Voices English Places* (Stamford, 2000), pp. 47–8 and 54–7 respectively.

'island', augmented by a final element *-st* from analogy with *Aust* (Smith, 1964–5, III, 120). If this is so, 'Ingst' would seem a plain term of geomorphology meaning 'the island': indeed, in its anonymity, it has all the appearance of a toponym conferred casually on the settlement by the very sparse post-Roman population of a desolate area abandoned by small industry and commerce. If it ever possessed a Latin name, it was arguably lost at some time after the departure of the Romans in c. 410 AD. Similarly, loss and substitution is a more persuasive hypothesis than that the remote and insignificant settlement of Aust managed to cling to a Latin name through three centuries of bureaucratic obscurity – even a name (were it ever granted) that would rank it alongside an élite group of the great metropolises or *civitas*-capitals of the Roman empire.

'Aust', 'Augusta' and Philology

The second argument against a Latin origin of the place-name 'Aust' is based on diachronic linguistic evidence. If 'Aust' had developed from the Second Legion's honorific *Augusta* (although the place-name was never thus recorded), then its spoken or Vulgar Latin form, by the early 3rd century at the latest, would have seen the normal loss of the intervocalic *-g-* to produce V.Lat. **Austa*. The related form 'Austus' from 'Augustinus' is attested elsewhere in the Roman empire, while the form 'Austalis' for 'Augustalis' is an attested London *graffito* from before c. 410 AD.¹¹ Whatever the historical reliability of the chronicled defeat of the British at Dyrham in 577 AD, it is generally accepted that the Saxon *Gewissae* of the upper Thames were in control of much of Gloucestershire by the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 7th century. Therefore, had **Austa* out of an alleged **Augusta* indeed been the Roman outcome, then the diphthong *au* of its evolved form (as with all early Old English loanwords from Latin that carried the diphthong) would certainly have produced, by the date of Aust's first recording in 691–2 AD, the O.E. form *ēast[e]* (fem.) or *ēast[a]* (masc.), just as Lat. *caucus* produced O.E. *cēac* ('jug') and *causa* produced O.E. *cēas* ('strife').¹² The evidence, therefore, arguably leads to the conclusion that 'Aust' had no Latin origin. The best advice that a philologist can offer at this point is that either a Brittonic or a Germanic root for 'Aust' must be sought.

The Argument for the Brittonic Origin of 'Aust'

For K.H. Jackson (1953), the Latin diphthong *au* had two outcomes in Brittonic: *aw* and *ou*. Outcomes in *aw*, to Jackson's mind, 'have the look of late or learned loans', that is to say, they are constructs. To this author's mind, such loans probably derive from the communities of the post-Roman monasteries of Wales to which the Llandaff Charters amply attest.¹³ For example, Welsh preserves *llawdd* 'praise' < Lat. *laudem*, *Parwl* < Lat. *Paulum*, *awdur* 'author' < Lat. *auctorem*, forms that Jackson finds 'artificial and late'. In this same group is also the Welsh *Awst*, a form which *appears* somehow related, but for chronological reasons cannot be, to the Gloucestershire place-name 'Aust'. The noun *Awst* '[month of] August' derives late from Latin *Augustus* [*mensis*], as does the name of the early 8th-century King Awst of Brycheiniog and Llangors. It might be added, from a geopolitical point of view, that King Awst held no territory at all on the eastern shore of the Severn, and that his kingdom was widely separated from the Severn by the lands of two quite different dynasties, those of Tewdwr and Ithel ap Morgan. In the search for the origins

11. The related V.Lat. form *Austus* < *Augustinus* is attested elsewhere in the Roman empire: Jackson, *Language and History*, p. 93. For the London *graffito*, see Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names*, p. 511.

12. For outcome of Lat. *au* in O.E. see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1983), para. 508.

13. W. Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth 1979).

of 'Aust', therefore, Welsh *Awst* is one of comparative linguistics' seductive *faux amis*, causing popular confusion.¹⁴ On the other hand, the Brittonic outcome *ou* from the Latin diphthong *au* is agreed to be earlier than the previous form *aw* and the product of the common tongue untrained in literary Latin. It is attested by the word for 'gold' in Early Welsh (i.e. the form of Brittonic from c. 550 AD): *our* < Lat. *aurum*. The word is certainly from a more ancient category of Brittonic lexis than the examples in the paragraph above. This is consistent with the fact that the motivating cause for the Roman conquest of Wales, in the early second half of the 1st century, was gold. Therefore by 691–2 AD, when 'Aust' was first attested in the Anglo-Saxon charters, the form that the Mercian interrogator heard from his British respondent would have been **Oust[a]* not *Aust[a]*. In other words, a Brittonic origin for the place-name 'Aust' is an unsafe hypothesis.

In conclusion, therefore, apart from the historical arguments adduced in paragraphs above, which diminish the probability of the genuine survival in our region of any minor Roman or British place-name, including 'Aust', in the collapsed societies of sub-Roman *Britannia Prima*, it is also fair to say that the linguistic pedigree of 'Aust' remains elusive in the argument from Celtic.

The Argument for the Germanic Origin of 'Aust'

In the normative grammars of Old English, its diphthongs are normally given as four in number and do not include *au*. However, the sources sampled for enquiry into Old English have not been exhaustive: no Germanic philologist so far appears to have considered the place-name 'Aust' as a subject for thorough investigation. Either a Latin or a Brittonic origin has been promoted, but not conclusively. By 691/2 AD, the date of the first citation, Aust lay in what might be termed a transitional linguistic zone between the two Old English dialects of Anglian (Mercian) and West Saxon, as the relevant diagnostic isoglosses indicate (Fig. 2). The place-name 'Aust', with its distinctive diphthong, might therefore have originated in either area. Early (West) Germanic is deemed to have numbered the diphthong *au* amongst its vocalic formations before its offspring, the major dialects of Old English (Anglian and West Saxon), dropped it by c. 450 AD. Whilst the dialects of Old English in the early post-migration period then saw the development of diphthong *au* to *ēa* (*ēast* east, *dēaþ* death, *lēaf* leaf, *strēam* river), Old Scandinavian in the North Germanic language group retained the diphthong in question. Hence *aust/austr/austan* ('east/(more) eastwards/from the east') can be found in place-name formations in northern latitudes of England associated with 8th- and 9th-century Norwegian or Danish Viking settlements: for example 'Austwick' (North Yorkshire) derives from O.Scand. *austr* + O.E. *wīc*, 'East dairy farm/dwelling'.¹⁵

On the other hand, before Anglian migration to Britain in the 5th century, early Anglian and Scandinavian had developed in contiguous geographical zones and shared similar features in vocabulary, morphology and phonology, so that a discrete North-West Germanic macro-group has recently been proposed for pre-migration continental Europe.¹⁶ The Mercian (Anglian) takeover of Gloucestershire by Penda took place in 628 AD at the expense of the West Saxons, who until then had occupied most of the county after the chronicled battles of Dyrham in 577 AD and *Fedanleag* (probably Stoke Lyne, Oxfordshire) in 584 AD (conventional dates). There is a strong case, therefore, for considering the influence of Anglian, with its possible Scandinavian

14. Jackson, *Language and History*, para. 25: the outcome of Lat. diphthong *au* in Brittonic.

15. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, 83, para. 135: early Germanic *au* in Old English. For Scandinavian form 'Austwick' see Mills, *English Place-names*, s.v.

16. H.F. Nielsen, *Old English and the Continental Germanic Languages* (Innsbruck, 1981), pp. 257–8. J. Hines, 'Philology, Archaeology and the *adventus Saxonum vel Anglorum*', in A. Bammesberger and A. Wollmann (eds.), *Britain 400–600 AD: Language and History* (Heidelberg, 1990), pp. 28–33 and bibliography.

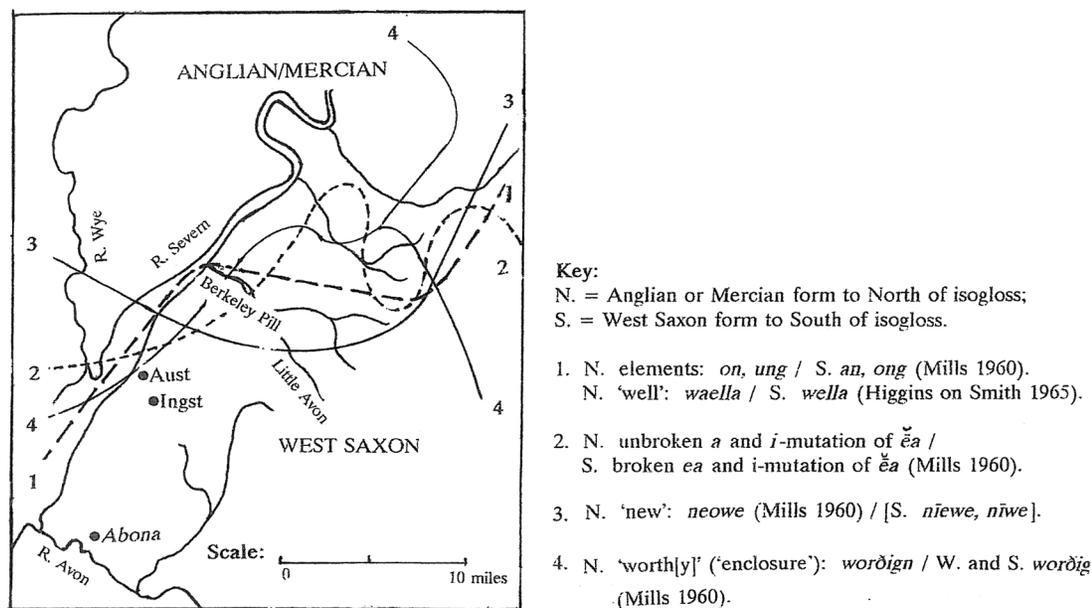


Fig. 2. Old English dialectology of Gloucestershire. Map based on A. D. Mills (1960).

adstratum *au*, in the formation of the place-name Aust, first recorded in 691/2 AD.

The pace of change of Germanic dialects in England in the early period largely remains obscure: but it is possible that the regular transformation of the Early Germanic diphthong *au* into its attested West Saxon form *ĕa* was retarded in the probably conservative dialect of the *Gewissae*. Their migration westwards into the valleys of the upper Thames was early; a group of three graves from Dorchester-on-Thames have been dated to c. 420 AD.¹⁷ Thus, even before the end of the Romano-British period the *Gewissae* may have been cut off from the pool of Saxon speakers of the Essex and Sussex shores of their landings. The meagre artefacts of most of their early burials confirm their economic and social isolation and suggest classic conditions for linguistic stasis, sufficient, for example, to retard the general evolution of the dialect. It is therefore equally reasonable to argue for archaic West Saxon influence in the formation of the place-name 'Aust', as displaying the diphthong *au* of Early Germanic instead of the fully evolved *ĕa*. Thus in 691/2 AD the paradigms of *aust* (signifying 'east'), derived from either the Scandinavian adstrate *au* of Anglian or from an archaic Early Germanic *au* of West Saxon, would arguably have been heard by the Hwiccian interrogator at Aust, instead of O.E. *ĕast*. In a word, he would have recorded 'Aust' for 'East' as a matter of course.

The Philological Argument: Conclusion

Perhaps first known as 'East Cliff' by early navigators from the direction of Ireland and by the more numerous and more prosperous Romano-British population of the western (Welsh) bank

17. Hines, 'Philology', p. 22 and n. 12. Cf. also J.N.L. Myers, *The English Settlements* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 101–3; C. Heighway, *Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire* (Gloucester, 1987), pp. 22–30.

of the Severn, Gloucestershire's Aust was not attested until the last decade of the 7th century, by which time any nouns of the Early English language that, for any reason, had clung to *au* instead of *ēa*, would have lost their meaning. Place-names, by their very nature, are conservative forms; while the language around them, generally, changes with the passage of time, the place-name, in order to retain its usefulness as a reliable reference of location, resists change. The result is that the sense of a place-name, or any of its elements, that once meant something, becomes opaque. To take the earlier entry (1) of 691–2 AD as more usefully diagnostic: when interrogated, the respondent identified the humble settlement, presumably still with its jetty, as simply 'Aust[a]'. There may have been in his mind no intimation that his *aust[a]* had indicated 'east' in the time of his late 6th-century settler forefathers, when it would have required – and doubtless was provided with – a target noun such as 'cliff'. Significantly perhaps, through stubborn folk-memory, it was this element 'cliff', that was picked up again (if intermittently interrupted) between 979 and 1546 in the later forms of *Austanclif* (5), *Austreclive* (6), *Austeclive* (8) and *Aust Cliffe* (10). But the single form 'Aust', proposed here as proto-Scandinavian or Early Germanic in origin, because shorn of its original meaning, remained the (monothematic) place-name of the old Roman ferry station throughout most of its written history – a mischievous source also of south Gloucestershire folk mythology. Overwhelmingly, from the philological evidence assembled here, the Gloucestershire place-name 'Aust' appears to have an early Anglo-Saxon origin, rather than either a Latin or a Brittonic ancestry.

Aust, Bede and the location of Augustine's Oak Conference

The philological approach developed above strongly suggests that at 1, 3, 7 and 9 there is no linguistic connection whatsoever between the place-name 'Aust' and the name of the Christian missionary and later saint of Canterbury, Augustine. The material also raises the question as to why none of the land-charter and anecdotal formulations of 'Aust' make reference to the landmark oak which lent its name to the gathering of the Roman and British clerics in the first place. Both O.E. *āc* and alternatively *treo[w]* are common enough elements in the formation of dithematic toponyms of the early Anglo-Saxon period: e.g. Barnack (Cambs.) <*Bernac* (*Domesday Book* 1086) <O.E. *beorn* + *āc* 'warriors' oak'. The toponym 'Oswestry' (Shrops.) has a similar history. It is traditionally connected to Saint Oswald, king of Northumbria, who is reputed to have died beneath a tree there from his battle wounds in 642 AD, only three decades after Augustine's death: hence Oswestry <*Oswaldstreu* (c. 1190) <O.E. *Oswaldes* (Oswald's) + *trēow* (tree). Margaret Gelling has confirmed no less than 38 examples of names of settlements or historic meeting places composed of an Old English personal name in the genitive case combined with 'tree'.¹⁸ In the light of this common early medieval practice of naming places, it is perhaps a matter of surprise that none of the earliest forms of 'Aust' attract 'oak' or 'tree', given that it was a tree, to the minds of the Church's annalists whom Bede consulted, which identified the legendary encounter.

Location or locations of Augustine's Oak Conference: an alternative hypothesis

As has been said, Bede asserted that Augustine's conference 'at Saint Augustine's Oak' was held with the leadership of the church 'of the British kingdom nearest to Kent ... at a place ... on the borders of the Hwicce and the West Saxons'. It is now generally accepted that Bede was making reference to the geopolitical situation as it existed at the time that he was writing his *Ecclesiastical History* in c. 730 AD. By this time the Mercian sub-kingdom of the Hwicce in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire

18. M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), pp. 212–3.

and south-west Warwickshire (approximately co-terminous with the pre-Reformation diocese of Worcester) had been established for about a century. This Mercian hegemony had been achieved at the expense of the West Saxons, who had been expelled from the region after defeat at Cirencester in 628 AD. Within a generation the West Saxons had rallied and from their Roman-walled capital at Dorchester-on-Thames had overrun that part of the post-Roman kingdom of Dumnonia which lay to the west of the forest at Selwood and to the south of the Bristol Avon and the adjacent defensive earthworks of West Wansdyke. This military expansion into the Christian British kingdom, establishing new borders for the kingdom of Wessex, occurred following victory at the battle of Pensewood in 658 AD.¹⁹ Consequently, in c. 730 AD, Bede located the site of Augustine's 'Oak' conference somewhere along the borders of the kingdom of Wessex and the Mercian sub-kingdom of the Hwicce thus defined, where the entire area's most important political statement was West Wansdyke, with its hill-top forts and late-Roman earth ramparts overlooking the Bristol Avon (Fig.1).

The historical picture in Bede's time thus favours a location for Augustine's 'Oak' conference which must exclude Aust on philological grounds, as also on the grounds that the settlement stood on no definable political border in c. 730 AD. Importantly also, had Bede intended Aust, he would most probably have mentioned the proximity of the river Severn at this juncture, which he mentions elsewhere as 'amis Sabrina' in his *Ecclesiastical History* (V.23), together with the other great rivers of England, the Thames, Trent, Humber and so forth. But the location of the 'Oak' conference, on grounds of the known political borders in Bede's day, could include the more recently proposed sites at The Oak in Down Ampney (Heighway with reservations), Malmesbury (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Stancliffe) and Kemble (Eagles). But most impressively for this writer, College Green at Bristol, proposed by Seyer in 1821, can also be included,²⁰ since in 603 AD, 'the British *provincia* nearest to Kent' whose church representatives Augustine allegedly met, was the kingdom of Dumnonia, forged from the southern part of the former Roman province of *Britannia Prima*: Cornwall, Devon, west Dorset and Somerset. By the 7th century, Dumnonia probably also included within its sphere of influence the very Christian British region of south Wales, to the west of the Severn estuary (Fig. 3).²¹

The route of Augustine's Roman party to the West Country

From the time of his arrival in 597 AD at Canterbury, the capital of the Kingdom of Kent, Augustine was under the personal protection of its pagan king Aethelberht and his Frankish queen Bertha, a Christian. Bede informs us that at this time Aethelberht was at his most powerful and influential as *Bretwalda* (overking) of all the kingdoms south of the Humber. The historical circumstances thus made Augustine's journey across England to the west country all the swifter and more secure. The distinguished cavalcade of Roman churchmen is said to have included both Abbots Mellitus and

19. D. Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce* (Leicester, 1985), pp. 7 (Fig. 2), 8–9, 16–19; M. Costen, *The Origins of Somerset* (Manchester, 1992), pp. 81–2; D. Pearce, *South-Western Britain in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 2004), pp. 249–51; D.H. Higgins, *The Bristol Region in the Sub-Roman and Early Anglo-Saxon Period* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association Pamphlet 118, 2006), pp. 14–19, 31–7.
20. Heighway, *Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire*, p. 94. C. Stancliffe, 'The British Church and the Mission of Augustine', in R. Gameson (ed.), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud, 1999), p. 128. B. Eagles 'Augustine's Oak', *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003), pp. 175–8. S. Seyer, *Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol and its Neighbourhood* (Bristol, 1821), pp. 225–31.
21. R. White, *Britannia Prima: Britain's Last Roman Province* (Stroud, 2007), chs. 7–10. B. Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain 600–800* (Harlow, 2006), pp. 118–28.

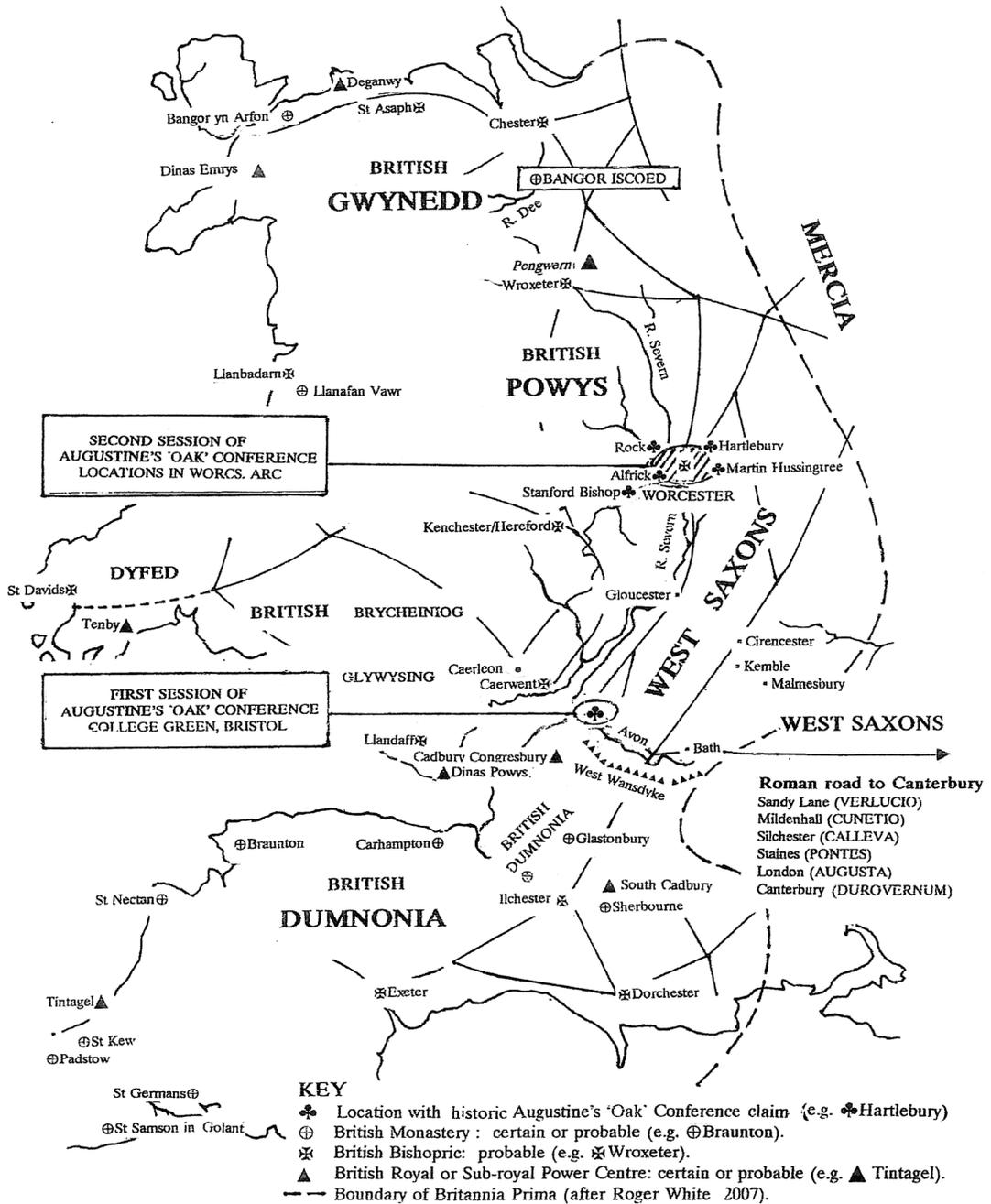


Fig. 3. Probable locations of St Augustine's 'Oak' conference 603 AD.

Justus, before their promotion to their new sees at London and Rochester. With Augustine also, in all probability, came the young Roman monk Jordan, who was later buried in the chapel, now lost, on College Green at Bristol, before the foundation of the Anglo-Saxon town.²² The Roman party's shortest route to the nearest British kingdom would have taken them from Canterbury (old *Durovernum*) to London of the East Saxons (whose king was Aethelberht's nephew), then via Staines (*Pontes*), through the West Saxon-controlled territory of king Ceolwulf, to Silchester (*Calleva*), Mildenhall (*Cunetio*) and Bath (*Aquae Sulis*). Thereafter, the Roman churchmen would have proceeded, as required, to the site selected for the conference (Fig. 1).

'Dignitas' and the Roman Church party in Britain

The Roman Church party was doubtless well-mounted, provisioned and hosted along the route by virtue of a royal Kentish warrant and protected by a royal Kentish bodyguard. It is important to bear in mind the rigorous protocols of the Late Roman world of Augustine's period, as developed in the late 4th/early 5th-century formulary *Notitia dignitatum* ('List of all Ranks and Administrative Positions both Civil and Military'), a handbook promulgated by the bureaucracy of the imperial court at Constantinople. The rigid formality is well reflected, for example, in the grand mosaics of Justinian and his courtiers, including his bishops, in San Vitale at Ravenna.²³ Augustine and his party were not simple monks engaged in a conventional, low-key missionary venture. They were representatives of the pope in Rome engaged on a foreign mission of high diplomacy. The pope, Gregory I, was not only head of the Christian church *urbis et orbis* but had also been the civil head (Prefect) of the City of Rome within the Roman Empire, the Eternal City's *apocrisarius* ('spokesman') at the imperial court. Gregory was Christ's servant first in spiritual matters but, well before the investiture disputes of later centuries, he was the emperor's servant also in the secular realm.²⁴ This dual mantle lay vicariously on the shoulders of Augustine, Gregory's head of mission to England, who in his political role, would have also shared, through Gregory, Justinian's aim to restore the Roman Empire to its former extent and glory. To the emperor's mind, the Christian church was an instrument for that purpose, even if Augustine's conference with the British church had to take place, as British and Anglo-Saxon custom required, not in a grand courtly setting but, mindful of timeless convention and superstition, in the open air, on the neutral ground of some political border, hard by a conspicuous landmark, whether tree, burial mound or monolith.

However, the high dignity of the Roman church and the might of the Roman state, which Augustine represented on England's distant shores, would not have tolerated the subordination of Roman authority nor disrespect for the *dignitas* of its representatives. This symbolic assertion of authority was shown immediately upon Augustine's first official meeting on Thanet with king Aethelberht of Kent. Bede remarked on the Roman party's papal display of impressive religious icons on that occasion: the great silver cross and the painted panels of Christ the Saviour which marked the opening of that first crucial conference.²⁵ If it was conceded that the meeting with the British clergy should be held outdoors beneath an oak, the Roman party would not have been proportionally content with accommodation beneath canvas. A built environment for suitable accommodation close to the conference's location would probably have been a *sine qua non* for

22. D.H. Higgins, *Saint Jordan of Bristol: From the Catacombs of Rome to College Green at Bristol* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association Pamphlet 120, 2007), pp. 1–6.

23. C.M. Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge Mass. and London, 2004), pp. 18–23, 40–4, 164–5.

24. C. Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 251. J.N.D. Kelly (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford, 1986).

25. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I. 25.

Augustine's dignified party of Roman monks. Several of them, like their master pope Gregory in Rome, for example Mellitus and Justus at the 'Oak' conference, were of high Roman birth. Gregory was *clarissimus* (of senatorial rank) while Augustine himself was most probably of the wealthy, class-conscious rank of the *decuriones* which traditionally filled early monasteries: 'a deeply aristocratic culture of status influenced [continental] Christian leaders'.²⁶ As for the British party, constantly aware of possible treachery and suspicious no doubt of Augustine's status as a favoured client of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king in southern England, the meeting-place's proximity to British home territory must have been an essential requirement.

Diplomatic conditions for the choice of location of Augustine's Oak conference

The three constraints that the 'Oak' conference would arguably have imposed upon its planners were those of access, accommodation and security. On linguistic grounds, as already shown, Aust's popular and persistent claim as the location of the 'Oak' conference cannot reasonably be sustained. Also Aust lay on no political border known to history. While access to Aust, by water, either from the southern British bank of the Avon or from south Wales would not have posed a problem, adequate security for the British party at that remote spot could not have been guaranteed. And as archaeology has determined, beyond a military look-out on probably its old cliff-top temple site, Aust contained no villa or buildings suitable for the accommodation of a Roman papal party.

The other possible locations, Down Ampney, Kemble and Malmesbury, from the anxious perspective of British Dumnonia and south Wales, were all problematical. As far as access and security was concerned, the sites in question lay very deep inside West Saxon territory and demanded long overland excursions through strange territory. How far *Bretwalda* Aethelberht's writ extended may have been a matter of debate in the British party. While it may be correct to propose that the nearby former capital of *Britannia Prima*, Cirencester, offered still the possibility of well-founded if time-worn buildings suitable for the accommodation of a papal mission, the city with its extensive *territorium*, following British defeat at Dyrham in 577 AD, was also in the hands of the West Saxons, only some of whose families by this time may have been Christian. The candidature of the three settlements, Down Ampney, Kemble and Malmesbury, for the location of the 'Oak' conference can therefore not unreasonably be dismissed on grounds of access, security and accommodation, as these issues would have been assessed in 603 AD. Security was particularly important. Although the pagan king Ceolwulf of the West Saxons may have conceded access to the British for their colloquium on the borders of his kingdom, he would have done so only from loyalty to, or pressure from, his Christian *Bretwalda* from Kent, Aethelberht. Fears of the British clergy for their personal safety at Down Ampney, Kemble and Malmesbury may not have been groundless: it would have seemed a long way in and a longer way out.

The location of Augustine's 'Oak' conference: the first session

This leaves the case of Bristol for consideration, Samuel Seyer's favoured location, where, he reports, tradition had it that the abbey of Saint Augustine was raised hard by the site of the conference. Certainly it was here on land which later became College Green that the Anglo-Saxon mausoleum chapel of Saint Jordan, reputedly Augustine's companion, was built perhaps in the second half of the 7th century (Higgins 2007). The Green adequately fulfils the demands of all three criteria for the historic meeting: access, accommodation and security. The British party would have arrived

26. M.R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge Mass. and London, 2002), pp. 104–5, 198–9, 214.

at conference from possibly two directions: firstly from Dumnonia, south of West Wansdyke's ramparts, a British frontier fortification that would have been controlled from the military and religious hilltop site of Cadbury near Congresbury. And secondly from the direction of south Wales, from its bishops' seats such as Caerwent and its numerous monastic centres such as Llandaff (Fig. 3). Access to College Green would have been afforded safely by water: the Dumnonian party crossing the river Avon from the north Somerset shore and the Welsh party making passage across the Severn and into the mouth of the river Avon; either sailing past *Abona* (Sea Mills) or perhaps changing vessels there. Requirements regarding the security of the British participants would have been easily met. Swift evacuation by water would have been guaranteed for the British parties if treachery ensued, back across the Avon to safety behind the ramparts of West Wansdyke or downstream to the mouth of the Avon and across the Severn estuary.

The location of Augustine's 'Oak' conference: 'a conference for a second time'

Treachery and violence, as is well understood, were ever present threats in the politics and societies of the early Middle Ages, in England as elsewhere. Augustine himself, as Bede reports, was willing to abandon his missionary journey whilst passing through Francia, merely through reports of Anglo-Saxon savagery; and within a decade or so of the 'Oak' conference, a harmless body of some scores of praying British monks (Bede states 1,200) from Bangor Iscoed, some of whom must have been present at the second session of Augustine's conference, were slaughtered outside Chester by the pagan king Aethelfrith of Northumbria, as a preliminary to his defeat of the forces of the Christian king of Powys, Selyf map Cynan. St Boniface of Crediton, 'apostle of Germany', was slaughtered in 754 AD by a party of pagans as he was baptising in the river near Dokkum, in Frisia. The problem of security even for Augustine's own party was perhaps of less moment, provided the members did not stray far outside the reach of *Bretwalda* Aethelberht's writ. It is possible the Italian party may have been accommodated at Bath, still walled and with some of its Roman amenities intact (how Romans relished baths), leaving the remainder of their journey to the chosen site of the conference to be accomplished as required: perhaps downstream along the Avon to its confluence with the river Frome, or westwards along the accompanying Roman road (Margary no. 54), also transporting with them the sort of impressive religious icons displayed at Thanet.

It was exactly this punctilious sense of Roman authority and of appropriate Roman dignity that Augustine displayed at the second session of the 'Oak' conference, damaging to the outcome of his mission to the British church in the west of England, which it must have been Jordan's task to repair. Augustine, *more Romano*, naturally did not rise from his seat at the entry of the party of senior British monks and bishops, who were already disposed to display impatience at any hint of superiority on the part of the spokesman of the Keeper of Saint Peter's keys. The umbrage which the British immediately displayed and their obstinate resistance to all of Augustine's requests are dwelt on by Bede, who did not forgive this offensive rusticity, a display of apparent British provincial naïvety if not insubordination and pride. Bede clearly saw their reaction through the eyes of Augustine's Roman party, as an affront to the universal authority of pope and Christian emperor which had been vouchsafed to Augustine as their representative. However, in warming to this theme, Bede fails to make it entirely clear whether the second session of Augustine's conference was held in the same location as the first session.

The proto-diocese of Worcester and Augustine's Oak conference

Doubts over the location of the concluding round of talks ('a conference for a second time') are raised by the surprising and mostly forgotten fact of a tight cluster of five sites around Worcester

which lay historic claim to association with Augustine. Camden picks this tradition up as early as 1586 in his *Britannia*, noting:

'A place there is about this shire [Worcestershire], but precisely where it should be is not certainly known, called Augustynes-ace, that is Augustine's Oke, at which Augustine the apostle of the Englishmen and the Bishops of Britaine met.....in the end, when they could not agree, they departed on both sides with discontented minds, upon their dissenting opinions.'²⁷

Indeed, the suggestion of a dual location for Augustine's provincial synod is not unreasonable. College Green was clearly convenient for British access from the southern parts of old *Britannia Prima*, an area occupied, south of West Wansdyke, by the restored British kingdom of Dumnonia. However, by 603 AD, the central sector of the old Roman province, from West Wansdyke northwards to the Warwickshire Avon, was in the control of the West Saxons. It may have been this hostile wedge of territory which effectively prevented the British churchmen of the still unconquered northern part of *Britannia Prima*, including the important Christian centres of Wroxeter, Bangor Iscoed, Worcester and Chester, from freely participating in the first session of Augustine's 'Oak' conference, even if they had so wished.

The second session reflects a notable difference in the rank and authority of the participating British personnel. The first gathering appears to have been exploratory with unspecified 'bishops and teachers' present but with none of the more powerful and respected abbots of the monasteries in attendance. For the second session Bede probably had his hands on a more informative source: the facts and personalities were clearly more worthy of an historian's attention. This session was attended, Bede avers, by specifically 'seven [British] bishops' and 'many learned men, chiefly from their most famous monastery which the English call *Bancornaburg*', that is to say Bangor Iscoed to the south of Chester on the river Dee, in now Clwyd. In many ways this monastery appears to have been the epicentre of spiritual authority in the surviving British Church of this northern sector of former *Britannia Prima*. Its founder was its abbot Dinoot (Donatus), whose patron was Cynan ap Brocfael, king of Powys. The *Welsh Triads* note that the *laus perennis* ('ceaseless round of praise') took place at Saint Dinoot's monastery, made possible by the exceptionally numerous community of 2,400 monks, allowing Divine Service to be sung by one hundred monks in turn per hour.²⁸ It was against this spiritual powerhouse of the venerable British church that Augustine's Roman demands, blandishments and, finally, threats foundered.

Early Churches in the proto-diocese of Worcester and the second session of Augustine's Oak conference

The five settlements around Worcester which claim a traditional link with Augustine's 'Oak' conference are, clockwise from the northwest, Rock (with Abberley), Hartlebury, Martin Hussingtree, Alfrick and Stanford Bishop, all within a half-day's journey of the city (Fig. 4).²⁹ In late Roman times the ironworking town of *Vertis* (Worcester), with its Roman ramparts and within, the arguably late Roman foundation of St Helen's church, would have been the seat of a bishop. In the early post-Roman period the town was probably 'the focus of a British *provincia* ... as Bath,

27. W. Camden, *Britannia*, ed. and trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1610), 'Worcestershire'.

28. Yorke, *The Conversion*, pp. 149–51; White, *Britannia Prima*, pp. 86–96; R. Bromwich, *The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff, 1967).

29. H. Dalwood and R. Edwards (eds.), *Excavations at Deansway, Worcester, 1988–89: Romano-British Small Town to Late Medieval City*, Council for British Archaeology Reserve Report, 139 (London, 2004), pp. 18–22; S. Bassett 'Churches in Worcester Before and After the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons', *Antiquaries Journal*, 69 (2) (1989), pp. 225–56.

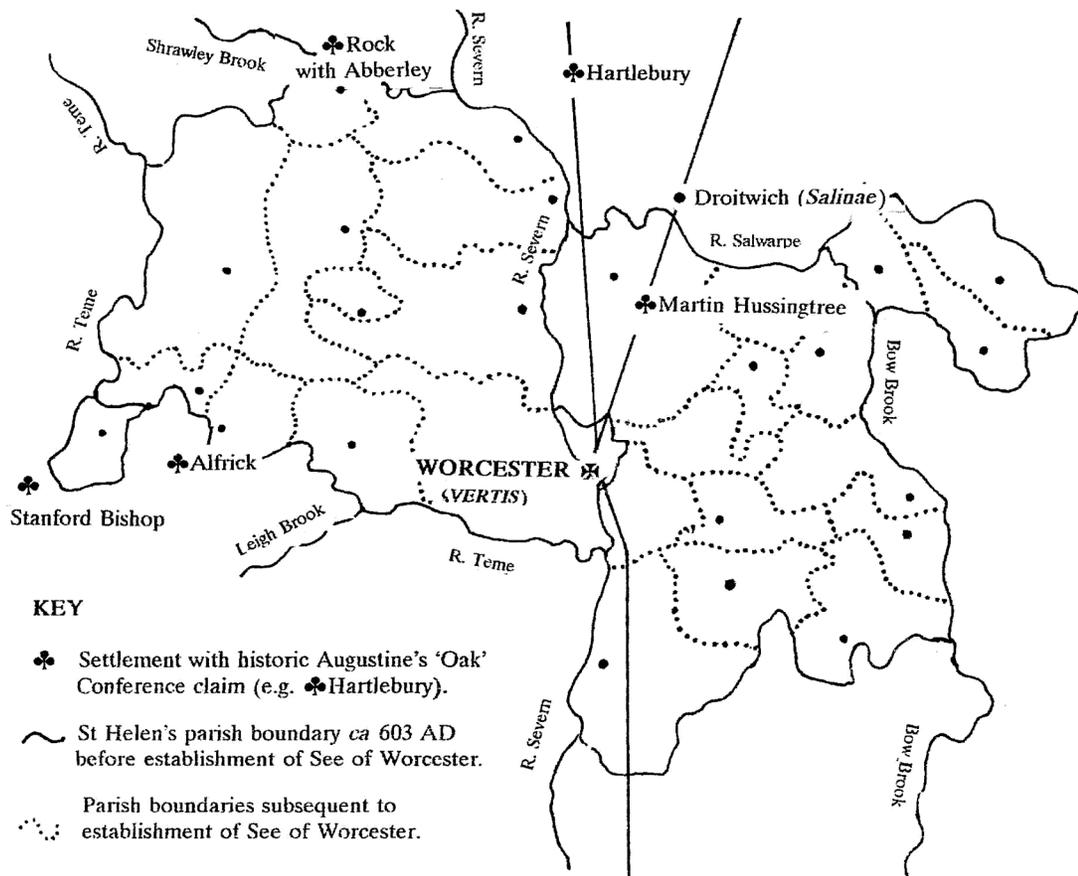


Fig. 4. St Helen's parish, Worcester, *c.* 603 AD, before the establishment of the see of Worcester. Map based on Stephen Bassett (1989).

Cirencester and Gloucester', as well as a notable centre of Christianity.³⁰ In view of the seniority, dignity and perhaps advanced years of the enhanced British party, it is feasible that Worcester and its region, so much closer to Bangor Iscoed than Bristol's College Green, may have been chosen as the second location of the 'Oak' conference. If this is so, the structure of Augustine's conference was pragmatically determined by the axis of the river Severn. For the Roman party, access to Worcester, the mid-point between Bangor Iscoed and the banks of the Bristol Avon near College Green, would have been afforded by a suitably fitted-out barge navigating up the river Severn. The British party, travelling 25 miles or so from Bangor Iscoed on a sound Roman road via Whitchurch, may well have embarked on the Severn at the old Roman town and inland port of Wroxeter (*Viroconium*) still overlooked, on grounds of security, by the hilltop fortress of the Princes of Powys on the Wrekin (*Pengwern*). They would then have sailed down the Severn to Worcester, the river also providing a convenient means of retreat in case of need. In the first

30. S. Bassett, 'How the West was Won: the Anglo-Saxon takeover of the West Midlands', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 11 (2000), pp. 107–18.

half of the 7th century, the weight of evidence suggests that the town of Worcester itself and its substantial *territorium* were in British hands, thus indicating that a diplomatic *quid pro quo* had been agreed to balance the West Saxon venue of the first session of St Augustine's conference in the Bristol region.³¹

It is notable that the legend of the 'Oak' conference condenses persistently and impressively at settlements around Worcester, more than elsewhere in the country. To ascertain which of the five rural settlements in question has the best claim to be the location of the second session of Augustine's conference is perhaps unnecessary, since it is not improbable that the second session was planned by Augustine as a peripatetic exercise – perhaps demanded, for reasons of security, by the British contingent – carried out daily from suitable accommodation within the walls of Worcester. All the Worcestershire locations concerned lie persuasively enough, as early medieval meeting places should, on or near an ancient boundary: that of Saint Helen's *parochia* in Worcester, its extensive territory the forerunner of the See of Worcester created later in 679 or 680 AD (Fig. 4 and Bassett 1989). This was also a political border that the British kingdom of Powys shared with the British princes of the territory of the *Magonsaetan* to the west (Herefordshire and part of Shropshire).³² Augustine's choice of Worcester as the location of the second session of the 'Oak' conference would not have been surprising: the old town was still a conspicuous centre of British church authority, so that, probably stimulated by Augustine's historic visit, the powerful diocese of the Hwicce was created there under Mercian control. The growth to ecclesiastical importance of Westbury-on-Trym, now within Bristol, may similarly be owed, in the first place, to Augustine's earlier presence, his *imprimatur*, as it were, having already been conferred on the region by his Christian presence on College Green in 603 AD. Certainly, Worcester and the Bristol region (at Westbury-on-Trym) were soon destined, under Mercian rule, to provide the major axis of Christian growth and influence in the English west.

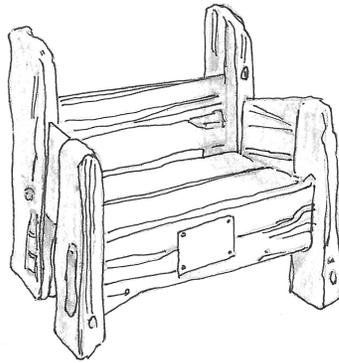


Fig. 5. Church of St James the Greater, Stanford Bishop, Herefordshire: St Augustine's chair.

31. Dalwood and Edwards (2004) follow Bassett (1989, 2000) in their view that Worcester and Worcestershire were still British territory at this time, contrary to the earlier suggestions of D.P. Kirby ('Welsh Bards and the Border') and C. Hart ('The Kingdom of Mercia'), both in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 32 and 47 respectively.
32. M. Lapidge *et. al.* (eds.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1999), *s.v.* 'Mercia'.

Places in Worcestershire to which the Augustinian legend attaches

The following are brief commentaries on the place-names of the settlements in Worcestershire which make, or once made, a claim to a 7th-century Augustinian connection (Fig. 4):

Rock: < O.E. *atter Ac* ‘at the oak’: tradition held that the ‘Apostle’s Oak’ in question grew in the grounds of Abberley Hall, formerly in the parish of Oak. Interestingly, the tree, which burned down in 1753, was once thought to mark the boundary of the Dioceses of Worcestershire and Herefordshire.³³

Hartlebury: the Augustinian legend attaches to both the Prior’s Oak in Bishop’s Park and the Mitre Oak marked by the eponymous inn on the main Worcester road.³⁴

Martin Hussingtree: the first element derives from O.E. *mere* ‘boundary’ + *tūn* ‘farm’. The second element Mills (1991) derives from the personal name Hūsa, thus ‘landmark tree on the boundaries of the *Husing tribe [of Worcestershire]’. James Wayland Joyce, importantly for posterity, noted that the legend of Augustine’s ‘Oak’ attached to the settlement of Martin Hussingtree, but states an unsupported and probably unsafe derivation of the place-name from ‘Ossuntree’, seeming to imply (although Joyce does not specify as much) a corruption of **Aus[t] in[s]tree*.³⁵

Alfrick: an ‘Augustinian’ etymology from *Ausric* is suggested in the 1688 edition of *Acta Sanctorum* under May 26th: ‘*Augustineac* iam dici contracte *Ausric* id est Augustini ditio’ (‘*Augustineac* thereafter pronounced, in shortened form, *Ausric*, i.e. Augustine’s plot’). Whatever the quantum of its persuasiveness, the entry is valuable as an early confirmation of Camden’s notice, in his *Britannia* (1586), that Worcestershire boasted an historic link with Augustine’s ‘Oak’ conference.³⁶ Mills (1991) does not mention the etymology of *Acta Sanctorum* but more convincingly cites the intermediate form *Alcredeswic* of the 13th century, i.e. ‘dwelling or farm of a man called **Ealbraed*’.

Stanford Bishop: no useful etymology obtains for this hamlet whose isolated church dedicated to Saint James the Greater now lies just within the county of Hereford. The churchyard possesses, besides a yew claimed to be of the Viking period, an undated standing-stone by the gate, while the church, with some late Norman work, contains what is reputed to be Saint Augustine’s oak chair used in his conference (Fig. 5). Pevsner limits himself to noting features of the ‘very simple’ structure of the ‘medieval armchair’, mentions the year and the circumstances of its alleged use by St Augustine but, respectful of traditions, leaves it at that.³⁷ It must be said that a light, collapsible Roman camp curule, traditional still for a high Roman dignitary of Late Antiquity, could otherwise have been an item in Augustine’s travel-furniture.

Conclusion

If Augustine’s ‘Oak’ conference of 603 AD were indeed in two major locations, but inaccurately reported as one in Bede’s chronicle, to which of the two sites did the title ‘Oak’ refer? It is not clear whether a landmark tree, such as a conspicuous oak, would indicate the notable presence or notable absence of other trees in the vicinity of the conference site. If the former, then a location in

33. J. Allies, *On the Ancient British, Roman and Saxon Antiquities and Folklore of Worcestershire* (London and Worcester, 1852), pp. 207, 215; *Worcestershire Victoria County History*, 3 (1913), p. 380.

34. J. Wayland Joyce, *England’s Sacred Synods: A Constitutional History of the Convocations of the Clergy* (London, 1855), p. 111.

35. Wayland Joyce, *s.v.* ‘Martin Hussingtree’.

36. See n. 27 above.

37. N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Herefordshire* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1963), *s.v.* ‘Stanford Bishop’.

the southern reaches of the Wyre forest near 7th-century *Vertis* (shortly to become *Wigorancaester*) is indicated. If amongst few trees, then the more pastoral location of College Green at Bristol is perhaps to be favoured.

More important, however, is to assert, from internal evidence in Bede's account and from investigation of historical geography supported by the evidence of Camden, the strong probability of the dual location of the 'Oak' conference. Of less importance, in itself, is the title of 'oak' for either session. The exact location of the first session may be arrived at by deduction from the knowns of Bede's text, from knowledge of how late Roman (or more exactly, Byzantine) diplomacy worked in far-flung locations and from awareness of the psychology of the embattled British clergy, in which a sense of pride and a complex of inferiority were at work, overlying a deep fear of treachery, examples of which duplicity Anglo-Saxon history is only too replete. Above all, the diplomatic bureau of the emperor, an integral part of his Byzantine court, was highly autocratic, punctilious and formalised. The values at work were aristocratic and selective. Pope Gregory was of the higher aristocracy of Late Antiquity; some of Augustine's entourage were known to be of the middling Roman nobility, and Augustine may have been also. These characteristics of class, in an age of deference, finally brought the Christian mission in England, despite reverses, to a successful conclusion. At the same time, they imposed, at certain critical junctures, their own limitations on the outcome, for good or ill, of the sessions of Augustine's conference with the fragmented British Church of former *Britannia Prima*.

The supposition that the second session of the 'Oak' conference may have been held at a different location from the first rests upon the probability that Augustine became aware for the first time, from the events of the first session, that more of the church in the west of Britain remained free from interference by pagan Anglo-Saxons than hitherto thought by pope Gregory and his Curia – that not only British Dumnonia but that part of the old province of *Britannia Prima* above the Warwickshire Avon still remained British and therefore had to be included in his mission to the British Church. How much Gregory himself knew of the political situation in Britain when Augustine set out from Rome in 596 AD may not have been much. *Britannia Prima* itself had been in existence from c. 312 AD, but the map from which he worked may have been an earlier compilation altogether, while the Curia's latest knowledge of the condition of the British Church probably stopped short at the mid-5th century, if it was based, as seems likely, upon Constantius's assessment in his *Life* of the Roman Church's emissary to Britain, St Germanus of Auxerre, who died in 448 AD.³⁸

The second reason to assume a new location for the second session of Augustine's 'Oak' conference is the uncompromising fact of the existence of an arc of place-names, each with an historic claim to an Augustinian connection, which centres on the sub-Roman religious and provincial capital of Worcester, evidence for the truth of a legend alive from at least the 16th century (Camden). If nothing else, this ancient anecdotal evidence confirms the appropriateness of a different location for any further session of the conference: a certain diplomatic evenness had to be demonstrated by the Roman party and perhaps the moral requirement had to be met of accommodating the physical needs and comfort of the more senior and probably more elderly British churchmen of upper *Britannia Prima*. If the impressively widespread Worcestershire legend has historical roots, it cannot be coincidental that the sites sharing the legend all exist on or near a boundary: that of Worcester's great *parochia* of St Helen's, before the See of that city was created in 679 or 680 AD.

It is satisfying for Bristolians to have rational grounds for identifying, or rather for reconfirming, a very probable location for the first session of St Augustine's 'Oak' conference at College Green in Bristol. Its suitability for a conference location in Augustine's time fulfils the first requirement,

38. D.H. Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford, 1997), *s.v.* 'Germanus of Auxerre'.

noted in Bede, that it should lie, obviously, on a border between English and British kingdoms, for the convenience of the churchmen of both parties. In 603 AD, the English kingdom was early Wessex, in which the (later) Bristol region then lay, and the British kingdom was Dumnonia, the southern area of the old Roman province of *Britannia Prima*. This latter realm, known to Gildas, lay in 603 AD to the south of the Bristol Avon or arguably better, south of the ramparts of West Wansdyke. Topography was a crucial factor. College Green lay overlooked by West Wansdyke's ramparts and hard by a navigable river that emptied into the Bristol Channel. The case for College Green can be asserted also, therefore, on the grounds of its accessibility by both water and land, and the security that its topographical setting particularly afforded the party that had most to fear, the British party.

The claim for College Green as the site of the 'Oak' conference can also be reasonably supported because of its later associations with the ordained monk Jordan, long held as Augustine's missionary companion in the west of England. Augustine soon departed at the close of the probably two meetings of the *colloquium* at Bristol and Worcester, but Saint Jordan, in order to have merited the distinction of a mausoleum chapel on College Green, must have stayed several years longer on the field of mission in the Bristol region, to the benefit of a grateful people. His name and achievements have been mostly forgotten since the Reformation but his *martyrium* certainly once stood on College Green, in close proximity to the 12th-century abbey dedicated by Robert fitzHarding to St Augustine of Canterbury.