

St.Dennis The Church in the Dinas

by Adrian Wilson

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No one knows exactly when Christianity first arrived in these islands but it is thought that it first appeared in the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. with the occupying Romans. It grew as a Celtic church, apart from Rome, incorporating older practices and paying no allegiance to any king, or pope.

At the end of the Roman occupation in the 5th century Germanic speaking settlers arrived on the east and south eastern coasts of England. They were pagan and so Rome despatched Augustine in 597 A.D. to try to convert them, he succeeded and a religious centre was set up in Canterbury.

Over the next few years this “Roman” style of Christianity spread across England but had no effect on the western side of the country and Ireland. They continued to practice Christianity in their own way even after the great meeting of the two different styles at the Synod of Whitby in 664 A.D. which decided to adopt the Roman version of Christianity.

Unlike the Roman style in England with churches at the centre of a parish, the Celtic church favoured religious centres, known generally as monasteries or priories, which administered faith, charity and welfare to their surrounding communities.

These religious foundations developed in Ireland, and spread to Wales. It is from these centres that missionaries set out to spread Christianity to non Christian peoples along the western Celtic fringes. With their Celtic connections, particularly to Wales who spoke a very similar Celtic language, Cornwall was a natural place for these missionaries to visit and also further on to Brittany which until about 800 A.D. spoke a Celtic language almost undistinguishable from Cornish.

Which is why Cornwall has so many place names beginning with “Saint” and with a church dedication to Irish and Welsh priests, some Breton priests also crossed back over to visit Cornwall later and left “Saint” dedications in a few Cornish churches.

Quite when Christianity first came to Cornwall is uncertain but Christian images have been found in the Hayle area as far back as 450 A.D. The early religious centres were mainly coastal reflecting the arrival on the north Cornish coast of missionaries from Ireland and Wales.

They developed inland gradually and cross county routes emerged as missionaries travelled across Cornwall to reach Brittany avoiding the perilous sea voyage around Lands End, creating routes from Hayle to Penzance and from Padstow to Fowey, known today as The Saints way.

So, how did St.Dennis fit into all this and why set up a religious place in a hill fort which seems an unlikely place?

Well, probably the worst way to introduce a new religion would be to arrive at a place and say “Forget the way you have been worshipping for centuries you need to do it this way”.

Early Christian leaders were more subtle than that – they introduced their new religion with stealth acknowledging the older beliefs and practices and incorporating some of them into this new religion, a merger rather than a take-over, to win people.

For example, early Christianity replaced a pagan festival Eostre with Easter, Christmas replaced a mid winter pagan festival, and springs, important sites for pagan reverence, became holy wells and so on. And the ancient Dinas on top of Carne Hill would have been an important site in the “folk memory” of local people even long after its disuse, it may have even contained some burials and was possibly held as a sacred place of the ancestors and therefore a natural candidate for an early Christian “makeover” into a Christian site.

Which brings us to the Hill Fort on the top of Carne Hill. Hill Forts were common features in the late Iron Age south west and Cornwall abounds in them. They became a feature in the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. But contrary to the old way of thinking many now believe that they were not always defensive structures, any perceived threat from Saxon England in Cornwall was several centuries away and the Romans wanted to trade for our tin but basically left us alone, they had bigger problems elsewhere in Britain.

So, many Hill Forts were simply a sort of local “amenity centre”, meeting places for local happenings, meetings of the local chieftain or tribal leader, court-like events, general gathering places. They were enclosed by banks and ditches, maybe also to keep animals in, but some were not sufficiently strongly built to suggest that they could act as a defence against an enemy.

Also, many do not show any evidence of buildings inside them which you might expect if the whole community used them to live as a safe place against attack. Some Hill Forts just contain evidence of a round house or two which might well have been the dwelling of the local tribal leader and a meeting house perhaps.

The Hill Fort at St.Dennis, although small by comparison to many others, would appear to fall into the category of a Hill Fort. It is not large enough to have contained much in the way of rudimentary buildings, it is far smaller than Castle-An-Dinas a few miles away across the modern A30, although the later construction of the church and use of the grave yard has destroyed any evidence of what lay inside the fort originally.

Two settlements were mentioned in the Domesday Book in the immediate area of the Hill Fort, Karsalan (Carsella) and Dimelihoc (Domellick). Carsella contains the Cornish word Kar or Caer denoting a “Round”. Rounds were farms which were enclosed by a ditch and bank and Univallate, which means enclosed by just one ditch and bank, and were not built on hilltops.

Hill Forts, or to give them their name in Cornish, a Dinas or Dynas, were built on hilltops and were bivallate, meaning two or more ditches and banks, which the Dinas at St.Dennis has, and the fact that the top of Carne Hill was regarded by local people as an ancient Dinas is reflected by the name of the settlement on its northern side, Domellick, known as Dimelihoc in the Domesday survey by the Normans of 1086.

Dimelihoc can be translated from the Cornish as Milioc’s Dinas (or Hill Fort) and refers to the tenement which covers Carne Hill’s northern slopes and included the hill top Dinas.

Mailoc, a personal name, must have been a local tribal leader or someone of importance who may have been obliged to re-occupy and reinforce the hill fort to defend his entourage, or cattle, into some sort of basic stronghold possibly in response to the threats on Cornwall’s border by the Wessex king, Ecbert in 814 A.D. Professor Charles Thomas thinks that the personal name may come from the Latin name “Aemiliacus”.

There is evidence of hill forts being re-occupied centuries after being abandoned, so maybe that was the case here.

There are two myths which must be corrected; one, which is quoted in a few old books and articles, being that St.Dennis is mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Book as Landines, which although it might fit in with an interpretation of the Cornish “Lan” for a religious enclosure and “Dinas” a hill fort, there is no evidence that this is the case. This has appeared in a few directories of the village and was mentioned in the 1951 Festival of Britain souvenir booklet. But the Domesday Book actually mentions “Landiner” not Landines and is actually a north east Cornwall manor, Professor Charles Thomas and I.S. Maxwell in his “Domesday Settlements of Cornwall”, both agree and locate Landiner in the parish of Altarnun. St.Dennis, it is agreed, is simply a verbal confusion by either the Normans or the Saxon landlord Ailmer who held the land before the Norman conquest. Neither would have understood the Cornish word Dinas and so it became dedicated to an un-Celtic and non local saint from Paris, Dennis.

The second myth is the claim repeated often in directories and guide books on the area that St. Dennis is very connected to the Arthurian legends.

This is not true, mainly because King Arthur as a person did not exist - all credit to the village of Tintagel who have lived well on the story for many years, but he is fiction. King Arthur was a "folk memory", a combination of several local chieftain warriors from the distant past who were opposed to the encroachment of Wessex into the south west and Wales, in the early middle ages. His modern persona was "invented" by a Welsh monk, Geoffry of Monmouth in his 12th century book on the history of the kings of Britain which itself is largely made up.

The "spirit" of Celtic rebellion lived on in the form of Arthur and was taken to the bosom of the Welsh and Cornish that he would return one day and drive the Saxons from the land, it was seized on by an oppressed peoples as a portent of hope.

So the stories that the hill fort at St.Dennis was the "castle" of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall in the mid 5th century, who was killed at St.Dennis by Uther Pendragon who had designs on Gorlois's beautiful wife, Igraine and captured her and the hill top "castle", all is fiction. And archaeological excavations at the hill fort, mentioned below, show no evidence that its walls were ever made to be defensive and there is no factual or historical evidence of the existence of a Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, or of a King Arthur, and many places all over Britain and even Europe, claim Arthur was theirs.

The Goss Moor has also been mentioned as Arthur's royal hunting ground, again nonsense. At the time that Arthur was supposed to have lived the moor was already being worked for stream tin, and is a natural wetland, one of the largest in Cornwall, where the moor collects the infant River Fal from Roche parish, spreads it over marshy ground, albeit ground altered by tin streaming, and issues again as the Fal before Gaverigan bridge.

Although the church and grave yard have obliterated any traces of what lay inside the hill fort, an archaeological survey was carried out in 1962 by a small team from the Cornwall Archaeological Society. Some excavations under the floor of the church following the 1985 fire only revealed a few burials, none more than a few hundred years old and obviously deliberate church burials, Very briefly they dug a trench on the northern side of the hill extending out away from the churchyard wall into the adjacent field for a distance of about 60 feet. The study concluded that the Dinas had two concentric ramparts i.e. banks and ditches, the inner rampart probably primarily a stone construction was built on in 1826 from stones laying about the surrounding hillside to form a churchyard wall. The hillside was cleared around that time and the fields around Carne Hill were also constructed from this cleared stone, this is backed up by references that prior to this time there was no clear path up to the church and parishioners had to "wend their way" amongst the litter of natural granite boulders. There was also evidence that this 1826 church yard enclosure wall was built on a pre-1826 base course, indicating probably the original Dinas inner rampart.

They found evidence of a second outer rampart running parallel to the inner one and about 60 feet away from it. This rampart was a heavy bank with a rab, earth, turf and loose stone core, with a dry stone revetment on the inner and possibly outer face, making it bivallate and consistent with the usual Hill Fortress or Dinas construction.

The Dinas had an internal diameter of 230 feet and enclosed less than an acre of land, so not much space to have contained a settlement of roundhouses, and probably only contained a couple of rude buildings used for either the local tribal leader or the community, small though that community was.

So how does this link back to the foundation of the church? As I've mentioned the approach of the emergent Christian faith cleverly incorporated pre Christian sites and customs to persuade the population to accept this new faith.

St.Dennis however was not an immediate choice for a religious site, it was a poor upland windswept place, with no resident gentry and small scattered settlements like Trelavour and Hendra, and probably because of tin streaming Enniscaven was one of the most populated settlements in the area. The lack

of a large community is probably why a religious site took so long to establish after Christianity gradually spread across Cornwall.

Because of the nature of the Celtic church's foundation in Cornwall monasteries and priories were important centres of learning, faith and social care of their surrounding peoples. Missionary priests would go out into their local community and try to bring Christianity to them.

My own feeling is that the large and important Priory at Bodmin played its part in founding a religious place on Carne Hill.

As I've mentioned Christianity often focused on places which had a significance in the memories of local people, maybe not considered as "sacred" to them but of importance in the distant memories of the people who lived around them, there may even have been some burials of the "ancestors" there.

A missionary priest probably saw the Dinas as a focal point for the small scattered communities around it and set up a meeting or preaching place there. The ancient Granite Cross beside the path outside the modern church south porch was a preaching cross. These were common across Cornwall and are often found where later churches were built. The cross probably dates, because of its style of external patterning, to the 10th or 11th century A.D. which fits in nicely with the development of Bodmin Priory. In 981 A.D. the Vikings attacked Padstow and burnt St.Petrocs Priory there, and it was moved soon after to Bodmin for safety, which would give Bodmin extra importance and provide priests to go out into the surrounding countryside to bring the Christian message to the inhabitants of places like the small communities of St. Dennis.

So at around this time, a few years before the Norman Conquest, the Dinas saw priests administering the Christian faith in the open air beside the preaching cross inside the Dinas on the top of Carne Hill, and they may have constructed a small wooden shelter or chapel there as well in which to perform perhaps Christenings and other ceremonies.

The stone building which became the parish church was probably not built until several years after the Norman invasion, several pre-Norman religious houses were rebuilt in stone by the Normans who were amazing architects in stone as you will have seen from their great cathedrals and castles, so the mention of a Saxon font in some writings about St.Dennis church is inaccurate, it is Norman.

None of that earliest stone Norman church survives today, the earliest part of the structure is the two stage tower built, according to Cannon Miles Brown's book on Cornish churches, in the 14th century.

So there is a long history of a site which possibly stretches back over 2,000 years and still dominates the parish and the villages around it today.

This article is Adrian's own work and must not be copied or used in any form without written permission from Adrian. In writing the article Adrian used additional research from the writings of people like Bernard Deacon, Cannon Miles Brown, Professor Charles Thomas, Craig Weatherhill, Philip Payton and others.

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