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The communities of St Columbanus: Irish monasteries on the continent?

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Abstract

The image of the Irish saints on the continent, carrying the light of Christianity into the darkness of a Europe descended into barbarity, has proven one of the most enduring aspects of the ‘Island of Saints and Scholars’ narrative that formed part of every Irish schoolchild’s education. Although this motif may persist in the popular imagination, regularly used as a shorthand for Ireland’s relationship with Europe, it has been widely critiqued in recent decades as an overly nationalistic reading of the past. While recent reappraisals have focussed primarily on historical evidence, there is an enduring expectation among some that the monasteries founded by these individuals would be distinctively ‘Irish’ in their layout and material culture. This article offers a critique of this assumption by outlining the results of recent work carried out by an Irish-French team at the first of St Columbanus’ continental foundations, Annegray, in Eastern France. The preliminary results of work at two of his other foundations, Luxeuil and Bobbio, are also discussed. It is argued that there is nothing inherently Irish about the material culture of these sites, nor should we expect there to be.

Introduction

On a balmy summer’s night in 2015 the strains of Irish traditional music reverberate around Place Saint-Pierre in the historic spa town of Luxeuil-les-Bains at the foot of the Vosges Mountains in Eastern France. The local restaurants offer a *menu irlandais* for €15 and the local school children have spent weeks rehearsing their special connections with Ireland and Italy. A few hours earlier in the adjacent Abbatial Church, a mass was celebrated by the Bishop of Down and Connor, Msgr Noel Treanor, for a group of Irish pilgrims visiting the town, before continuing on their journey towards Bobbio in Northern Italy. It was on this very same site, in 1950, that Taoiseach John A. Costello met with the architect of Europe, Robert Schumann (Geary 2017; Kahn 2015), marking an important step in the ending of Ireland’s isolationism and a move towards greater integration into European politics. The choice of the site was no coincidence. Modern day Luxeuil is built around the abbey founded by the Irish monk Saint Columbanus in the 590s, and the image of a prominent Irish player in the politics of the nascent European states was significant. It was not the first time that the name

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Columbanus would be used as shorthand for Irish involvement in European events, nor would it be the last. From 2013 onwards, as Ireland slowly emerged from the worst effects of the 2010 Eurozone Bailout Programme, the motif of Columbanus once again took centre stage in speeches given by Irish leaders intended to reset the nation's relationship with Europe. Taoiseach Enda Kenny visited the site of the saint's tomb in the Apennine mountains prior to meetings with European leaders (Agnew 2013), while President Michael D. Higgins spoke to the European Parliament in Strasbourg of Columbanus establishing 'centres of learning, manuscript illumination, monasteries and communities across Europe' and recalled Robert Schuman's declaration that the Leinsterman was 'the patron saint of all those who now seek to build a united Europe' (Higgins 2013).

It is not just in the public realm that the figure of Columbanus has been used as a shorthand for such sweeping claims. The monasteries he founded have long been seen as characteristic of a new wave of foundations established across the continent by ascetic religious Irishmen (Meeder 2010; Helvétius 2012; contra Prinz 1965; Riché 1991). According to this model, they initially stood apart from other monasteries, but eventually changed the course of continental monasticism. It is not only Irish writers who have propagated this model (Cahill 1995; Hughes 1966; McNeill 1974). The Irish nature of monasteries such as Luxeuil, Bobbio or Peronne is also widely debated by continental scholars (Prinz 1965; Tosi 1980; Dierkens 1985; Zironi 2004, 3). In recent years attempts have been made to develop a more nuanced view of the context in which these sites were founded (e.g. Flechner and Meeder 2016).

To date the critique of the traditional model has primarily been carried out from an historical perspective. The aim of this article is to contribute to the debate by presenting the results of recent archaeological work at Annegray (Pl. I), the earliest



PL. I—The site of Annegray (centre) with excavation underway during the 2011 campaign, taken from the Église St Martin (© S. Bully).

of St Columbanus' foundations on the continent (Bully *et al.* 2011; Marron 2012; Marron and Bully 2017). The work was carried out as part of NUI Galway's *Columbanus' Life and Legacy Project* in collaboration with Dr Sébastien Bully of the CNRS (UMR 6298, ARTEHIS – Dijon). Five seasons of fieldwork took place between 2010 and 2014, involving participants from Ireland, France, Croatia and Italy. As we shall see, this article challenges the longstanding assumption that Columbanus' continental houses were distinctively Irish in their layout and material culture. The same is true of ongoing work at two of Columbanus' other foundations, Luxeuil and Bobbio, the preliminary results of which are also summarised.

Deconstructing the 'Irish monasteries' model

A central premise of this research is that it is not appropriate to apply the modern, ethno-nationalist term 'Irish' to the archaeology of 1,400-year-old monasteries. Rather than approaching them primarily with a view to identifying 'typically' Irish characteristics because of the origin of their founder, we should expect to encounter a much more complex situation, in which the vicissitudes of local political, religious and social structures also played important roles in shaping the character of these sites. Columbanus' own writings make clear that he self-identified as an Irishman and an outsider. In his letter to Pope Boniface, for example, he declares that 'all we Irish, inhabitants of the world's edge, are disciples of Saints Peter and Paul' (*Epistula V*; 25). Elsewhere, when writing to Gregory the Great, he stresses the difference in the position of his countrymen to that of his adoptive land, Gaul, in matters of *computus* (*Epistula I*), while he also calls on the bishops of Gaul to accommodate him and his fellow countrymen, whose *fedes* and *canones* 'brought them from [their] native land' (*Epistula II*; 35–45). What is at issue here is how that 'Irish' identity has been used by subsequent writers to advance their conception of Columbanus' foundations as different to contemporary continental establishments.

In the 640s Columbanus' biographer, Jonas of Susa, outlined how, having arrived in a Gaul where the Christian faith had been all but wiped out, this outsider set about re-establishing the position of the faith in the Frankish Kingdoms (*Vita Columbani*, I: 5). Aside from a brief introductory sketch of Columbanus' formative years in Ireland, he does not place a great deal of importance on Columbanus' Irish origins in shaping the monastic foundations which he established. The only mention of Irishness after the opening section is in relation to those members of the community of Irish origin who are allowed to travel with their leader when he is expelled from Luxeuil. Diem (2007, 525) argues that Jonas focuses on Columbanus' outsider status because it enhanced his aura of charisma. In this regard, it may not have mattered much that he came from Ireland as opposed to another distant land. Indeed, it has elsewhere been argued that, far from possessing any distinctively 'Irish' traits, the Columbanus of Jonas' text should more correctly be viewed as the construct of a Frankish milieu, aimed at emulating the monastic founding fathers of the eastern desert (Wood, I. 1982, 72).

Perhaps the earliest iteration of the modern view that Columbanus was responsible for reinvigorating the continental church is attributable to

Frederick Ozanam. In attempting to counter Gibbon's assertion that Christianity was a primary cause of the fall of the Roman Empire, Ozanam argued that Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries played a key role in transforming society and saving civilisation (Wood, I. 2013, 144). This idea was mirrored in the writings of his contemporary, Charles de Montalembert, whose interest in Irish politics, particularly Daniel O'Connell, no doubt influenced his perception of Columbanus the Irishman as an actor on the European stage (Wood, I. 2013; Flechner and Meeder 2016, 5).

This emphasis on Columbanus' Irishness is evident in most nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts. In the twentieth century, the term *Iro-franc* was coined to describe anything considered to indicate Irish influence, or indeed anything that does not square with the assumed norms of Gallic Christianity. The apogee of this model is to be found in Freidrich Prinz's seminal work *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, which envisages a characteristically Irish style of monastic life being established in the Vosges Mountains, before spreading far and wide through the foundation of a vast network of daughter houses which were by extension also seen as Irish in nature (Prinz 1965). According to Prinz, what was in question here was 'a qualitative break in monastic development that is connected causally with Irish monasticism'. In fact, 'the organizational structure of Irish monasticism had also contributed to the coming of the medieval type of aristocratic family' (1981, 76). Prinz's emphasis on the 'Irish' element in this movement was shared by contemporary continental authors. Moyse, in his appraisal of the development of monastic practices in the diocese of Besançon, argued that 'the aim of these Irishmen was very different to that of the Jura Fathers [...]: it was no longer simply a case of withdrawing oneself from the world, rather their aim was to change that world, to evangelise it' (Moyse 1973, 65). He also attributes the confrontation between Columbanus and the diocesan leaders as stemming directly from the 'original character of Irish monasticism' (Moyse 1973, 67). Pierre Riché echoes Jonas' depiction of the church in Gaul upon Columbanus' arrival and argues that he was so successful in his evangelical mission that he brought about a situation in which 'there were thus two Churches in seventh-century Gaul—the national Church and the Insular Church—and the latter began to grow in the monastic foundations patronized by the lay aristocracy' (1981, 64).

A key aspect in the perceived difference between the 'Irish' foundations and contemporary Gallic monasteries was the insistence of the founder that his abbeys remain outside the control of the local bishopric (*Epistula II*; McNeill 1974). This position has been taken to reflect peculiarities of ecclesiastical organisation that set the 'Celtic Church' apart from its continental counterpart (Chadwick 1961; Hughes 1981; Davies 1975). In addition to this, Columbanus' three foundations, and the others established in emulation of them, were interpreted as evidence for the distinctly Irish '*paruchia*' system (Hughes 1966). However, both ideas are built on models that have been contested in an Irish context over the past thirty years. The position and character of abbots in early

medieval Ireland has been reassessed and a more nuanced model of ecclesiastical administration has emerged (Sharpe 1984; Etchingham 1999; Charles-Edwards 2000). Even if one were to accept that some Irish monasteries enjoyed a certain level of independence from episcopal oversight, this would not make them unique as was once imagined (Etchingham 1999, 460). Contrary to the image presented by Jonas of an enfeebled church in Gaul, it is clear from the acts of councils held throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, as well as the writings of commentators such as Gregory of Tours, that the Gallic church is in rude health in the century preceding Columbanus' arrival, as it expanded beyond its traditional strongholds of the old Roman cities of the south (Biarne 1997; Codou *et al.* 2007; Becker 2014). A regular theme in the canons issued by these councils is the vexed issue of the independence of monastic foundations from local episcopal control. As early as the Council of Arles in 455, 'independence' was guaranteed to the monastery of Lérins, a privilege which was later emulated by Caesarius of Arles in his establishment of the female foundation of St Jean and which formed the basis for canons issued by North African councils in the following decades (Magnou-Nortier 1997). The issue continued to prove a bone of contention throughout the sixth century, during which time it may be considered representative of a wider conflict between secular and episcopal powers about control of landed assets (Wood, S. 2006). Far from an inherently Irish issue, unique to the '*Iro-Franc*' monasteries of Columbanus, the wrangling between bishopric and abbatial roles was a longstanding issue upon Columbanus' arrival. As Magnou-Nortier has pointed out 'the exemption that we find in the Columbanian foundations in the seventh century, is already formulated in explicit terms and practiced at Lérins and in North Africa at the beginning of the sixth century' (1997, 141, author's translation).

What then of the network of subsequent foundations that have been viewed by some as evidence of a '*paruchia*' system on the continent? Upon Columbanus' death the sole foundations claiming a link to him were those he founded himself. In 628 Pope Honorius granted an exemption to the monastery of Bobbio, declaring it to be independent of local diocesan power (CDBX, 102). After this exemption was granted, the use of Columbanus' rule rose sharply. The leading role in this growth was played by a close circle of acquaintances from the Seine river basin, members of aristocratic families who had hosted Columbanus in the early 600s and who had a shared experience of being educated at, and later served in, the court of Clothar II (Fox 2016). This highly influential group of aristocrats, along with associates from their time at court, was responsible for the foundation of a substantial number of monasteries, including Rebais, Jourrare, Fontantelle, Jumièges, Soglinac, Mossiac and Faremoutiers (Wood, I. 1994; Fox 2014). One of their number, Faro, brother of Burgundofara and the founder of Faremoutiers, was key to driving the policy of immunities for monastic houses under the later Merovingian rulers. Given this specific context the interest in Columbanus among the local elites who had supported him probably lay less in his Irishness or the distinctiveness of his monasteries, and more

in how his legacy could help them secure long-term control over their assets (Rosenwein 1999; Hen 2007). The foundation of a monastery with the rule of Columbanus, headed by a son or daughter who had conveniently been blessed by the saint in their youth, allowed a noble family to hold up the papal exemption as a precedent to put family land out of reach of episcopal structures and an expanding state.

The archaeological record has featured prominently in discussions about the Irish character of Columbanus' foundations. Features such as concentric curvilinear enclosures and wooden churches were traditionally seen as exemplifying how Irish monasteries differed from those on the continent. It is not surprising, therefore, that authors were inclined to search for such features. Margret Stokes remarked of Annegray that 'around the base of [the] knoll, which is now a plough field, runs an ancient wall, evidently of the same character as that which enclosed the monastery of Glendalough and the cashels that surround most of our early monasteries in Ireland' (1895, 28). Considering the original form of nearby Luxeuil she states that 'it is more likely that these Irish monks followed their native custom of erecting a number of huts in groups around and about the oratory, either enclosing them in a cashel or making use of the old Roman walls' (Stokes 1895, 55). Almost a century later Peter Harbison introduced his outline of Irish ecclesiastical architecture in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter* by stating that it was intended 'as a contribution which will hopefully prove useful to those who may strive to isolate and identify 'Irish' buildings which may have been erected on continental sites where Irish *perigrini* are known to have been active' (1982, 618). A similar expectation was expressed by Liam de Paor: 'the Irish monastic system itself, which sponsored the peculiar layout of the monastery marked by a number of small churches and by a spate of dwelling huts, did not last very long on the continent' (1997, 144).

In contrast, Edward James has rightly questioned the assumption that the monasteries of Columbanus would be 'Irish' in form (1981, 1982), while Loveluck and O'Sullivan express similar scepticism (2016, 28–29). Such scepticism is warranted given the limits of our knowledge about the layout of Irish monasteries at the time of Columbanus; it is likely that they were not as uniform, nor as different from some of their continental counterparts, as traditionally assumed (Edwards 2009; Ó Carragáin 2017). Nevertheless, the idea has proved resilient: Richter, bemoaning the lack of archaeological work at the monastery of Bobbio, stated that 'a feasible and perhaps more rewarding comparison would be with early Irish monasteries even though no early medieval drawings are available for them comparable to the plan of St Gallen [...] potential comparative material is available from Ireland' (Richter 2008; see Destefanis 2011). Even more recently O'Hara posited an interpretation of the site at the centre of this article, Annegray, based solely on the presence, some distance from the church, of an undated curvilinear field boundary, which seemingly recalled the classic form of Irish monastic enclosures (O'Hara 2015, 154; see Bully and Marron forthcoming). Let us consider the archaeological evidence in more detail to determine whether there is anything to support these ideas.

Annegray

Landscape context

The earliest mention of Annegray comes from Jonas' *Vita Columbani* in which he tells us that, having arrived in the Frankish kingdoms, Columbanus is received at the court of Sigibert who grants him land to found a monastery on the edge of his kingdom.¹ As Jonas puts it:

There was at that time a vast wilderness called the Vosges in which there was a fortress, long since in ruins, called Anagrates according to ancient tradition. When the holy man came to it he settled there with his companions (VC I: 6).

According to Jonas, the young aristocrats of Frankia flocked to Annegray in such numbers that soon after Columbanus founded another monastery nearby, in the *castrum* of Luxovium, which was itself soon followed by a further monastery to the north at Fontaines (Fig. 1). In each instance Jonas goes to great lengths to emphasise the remote and desolate environment of the new foundations. However, the wilderness motif is brought into question by the reference to a *castrum* and the fact that the site is named. Furthermore, the landscape setting of Annegray suggests it was founded in an inhabited area (Marron and Bully 2017).

The site lies in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains surrounded by a vast upland area known as the *Plateau des Mille Étangs*, formed by piedmont glaciers spilling out of the central Vosges and extending over an area of 2000 km². A characteristic of the modern landscape of Annegray that has long seemed to lend credence to the picture of a wilderness location evoked by Jonas are the dense forests covering the hillsides that lead up to the plateau and which dominate the landscape of the plateau itself (notably in Stokes 1895). However, much of this dates from the late nineteenth century and after, when large-scale depopulation of the area led to a shift to commercial tree planting as a less labour-intensive form of income (Mayaud 1991).

Annegray is located in the Breuchin valley, at a point where it turns north-east and narrows, making it a key location for controlling access to the heart of the Vosges mountains (Fig. 2). By continuing up the course of the valley and crossing over the relatively low Col du Mont de Forche, the traveller arrives at a point of the Moselle valley where the river is still navigable, thus providing swift access to the North Sea region (Py 1991, 293). Fifteen kilometres to the east, along the broad, flat-bottomed Breuchin valley lies the town of Luxeuil, recognised by Jonas as a

¹ The precise date for this foundation has been the source of some dispute. Much of this debate has centred on the contradiction between the mention of Sigibert (†575) in Jonas' account and Columbanus' own assertion that by 603 he had been in the Frankish realms for 12 years. There is, however, growing consensus that the mention of Sigibert is an attempt to erase the role of Columbanus' later foes, King Theuderic II and his grandmother Brunhilda, from the foundation process and that Annegray was indeed founded in 591 A.D. (M. Gaillard 2010, 17; Bullough 1997, 10–11; Diem 2007, 529; Wood 1982).

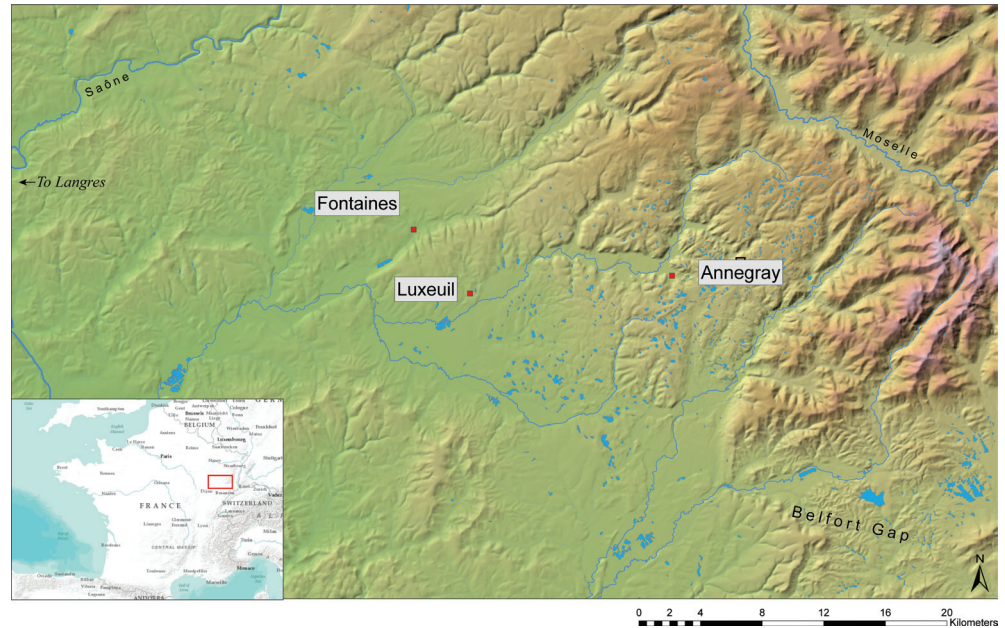


FIG. 1—Map of the Frankish foundations of St. Columbanus in the foothills of the Vosges mountains. (Produced using: Copernicus data and information by the European Union - EU-DEM layers and ESRI ‘World Topographic Map’ Feb 19, 2012.) <http://arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=30e5fe3149c34df1ba922e6f5bbf808f> (25 Feb, 2018).

former *castrum* with baths and pagan idols; according to his narrative it is not only a deserted location, but one redolent with pagan rites (*VC* I: 7). There are strong indications that *Route Departementale* 65, which runs between the two sites, follows the route of a Roman road providing access to the Moselle valley (Marron 2012). *Luxovium* itself lay at the intersection of a network of key Roman roads. The road from Besançon (*Vesontio*, the provincial capital of *Sequania*) north towards Plombiers formed the *cardo maximus* of the settlement (Faure-Brac 2002b). Even more importantly, the town was on the east-west road from Langres (later an important episcopal see) to the Belfort Gap, a strategically important area of low lying land between the Vosges and Jura mountains, which acts as one of the primary gateways between France and Central Europe (Lydie 2003). This skirts the southern edge of the *Plateau des Mille Étangs* and a field survey carried out in the 1980s revealed evidence for several significant rural dwellings along its course; this survey did not include the Breuchin Valley but Foidreconche, the sole commune investigated in the area, produced evidence for rural settlement in antiquity (Guillaume 1985; 1997). Despite the lack of intensive study of Roman rural occupation, sporadic finds over the past two centuries suggest that the Breuchin valley and the *Plateau des Mille Étangs* were anything but deserted: they include a large number of *ex-voto* offerings, funeral stelae and coin hoards, indicating religious as well as economic activity (Marron and Bully 2017).

Key to understanding this is the church of St Martin, which sits on a hill overlooking Annegray, dominating the point where the Breuchin valley

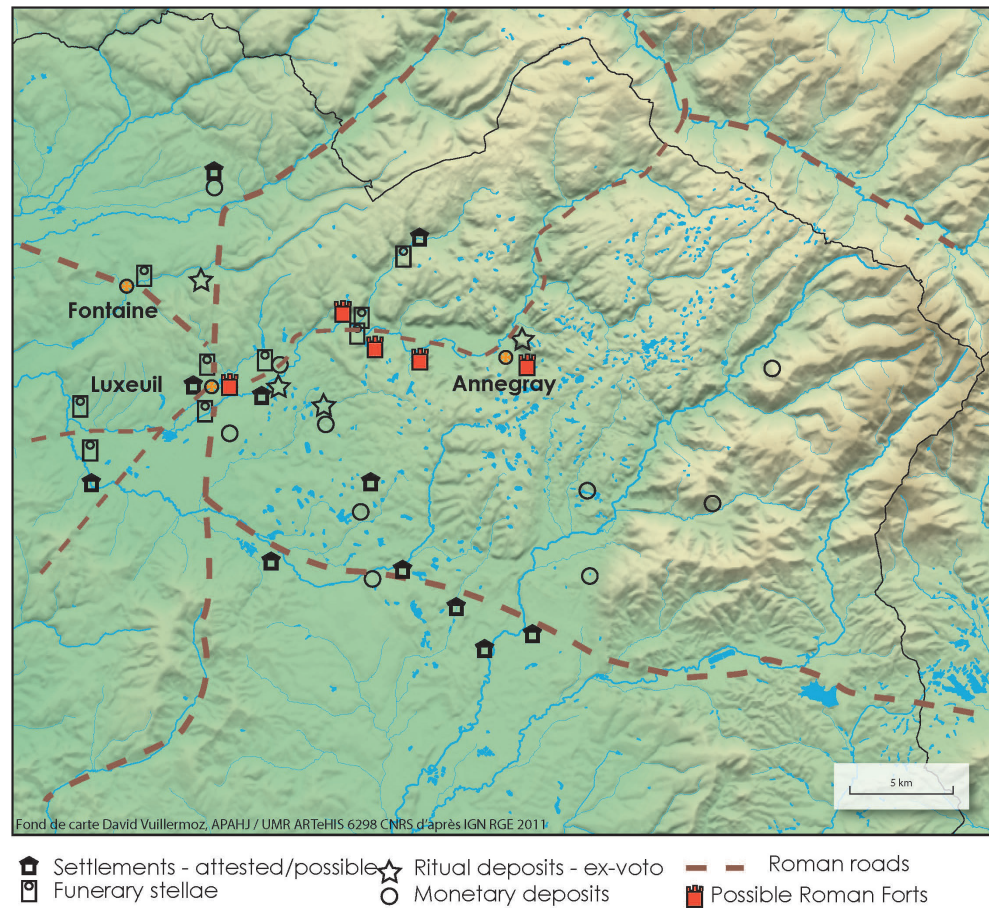


FIG. 2—Map of study area showing the location of the known Roman road system, the location of the putative road passing through the Breuchin Valley, along with the location of attested Roman finds.

narrows (Pl. II). In the nineteenth century a number of artefacts relating to the worship of the goddess Diana were found in or around the church, including five small *ex-voto* bronze statuettes discovered under the altar during refurbishments as well as a bas-relief bust of the goddess (C.A.G. 70: Commune 227, 225). The extant church dates to the twelfth century, but ninth-century spolia in its walls suggest an earlier stone structure stood here. Recent work has shed light on the transition from pagan ritual site to church (Bully and Marron 2015). The presence of both Late Antique and early medieval ceramics from a test trench in the interior would suggest there was little or no hiatus between these two uses; the earliest church here may have represented an early attempt to Christianise the landscape. If so, this was part of a wider pattern: Roman finds are common at early church sites in Franche-Comté (Jeannin 2003). Thus, contrary to Jonas' account, this was not only an inhabited landscape, but probably a Christianised one. This interpretation has major implications for how we consider Columbanus' interaction with local secular and royal networks.



PL. II—Ground penetrating radar survey underway on the exposed remains of the church of St. Jean Baptiste at Annegray, with the church of St. Martin at Faucougney visible overlooking the side (© S. Bully).

The archaeology of Annegray

The modern hamlet of Annegray sits in a bowl-shaped valley which opens on to the Breuchin Valley and is surrounded on the south, east and west by the *Plateau des Mille Étangs*. Slightly to the north of the hamlet, on a low rise which affords commanding views of the Breuchin Valley lie the remains of a Romanesque church, traditionally considered the site of Columbanus' monastery. The remains were exposed in an unscientific excavation in the 1950s carried out on behalf of the local *Amis-de-Saint Colomban*. This also revealed several Merovingian sarcophagi (Cugnier 1998). To the east and north of the church the modern escarped field boundary is curvilinear. One of the primary aims of the project was to investigate whether this boundary preserved the line of the early monastic enclosure and if so whether it bore any similarities to well-known Irish examples. The fact that Annegray, unlike Columbanus' more famous later foundations, was a greenfield site, allowed a range of investigative techniques to be employed to question the assumption that the site was laid out in a distinctly Irish manner.

A magnetic gradiometry survey (Fig. 3) was carried out in the area north of the church incorporating the curvilinear boundary and the area of commonage known as the *Breuil d'Annegray* (Area 1) (Bully *et al.* 2011). The latter is divided north-south by a series of irrigation ditches fed from a small stream originating on the *Plateau des Mille Étangs*. Two further areas were also investigated to the west (Areas 2 and 3). The most significant result of this survey for

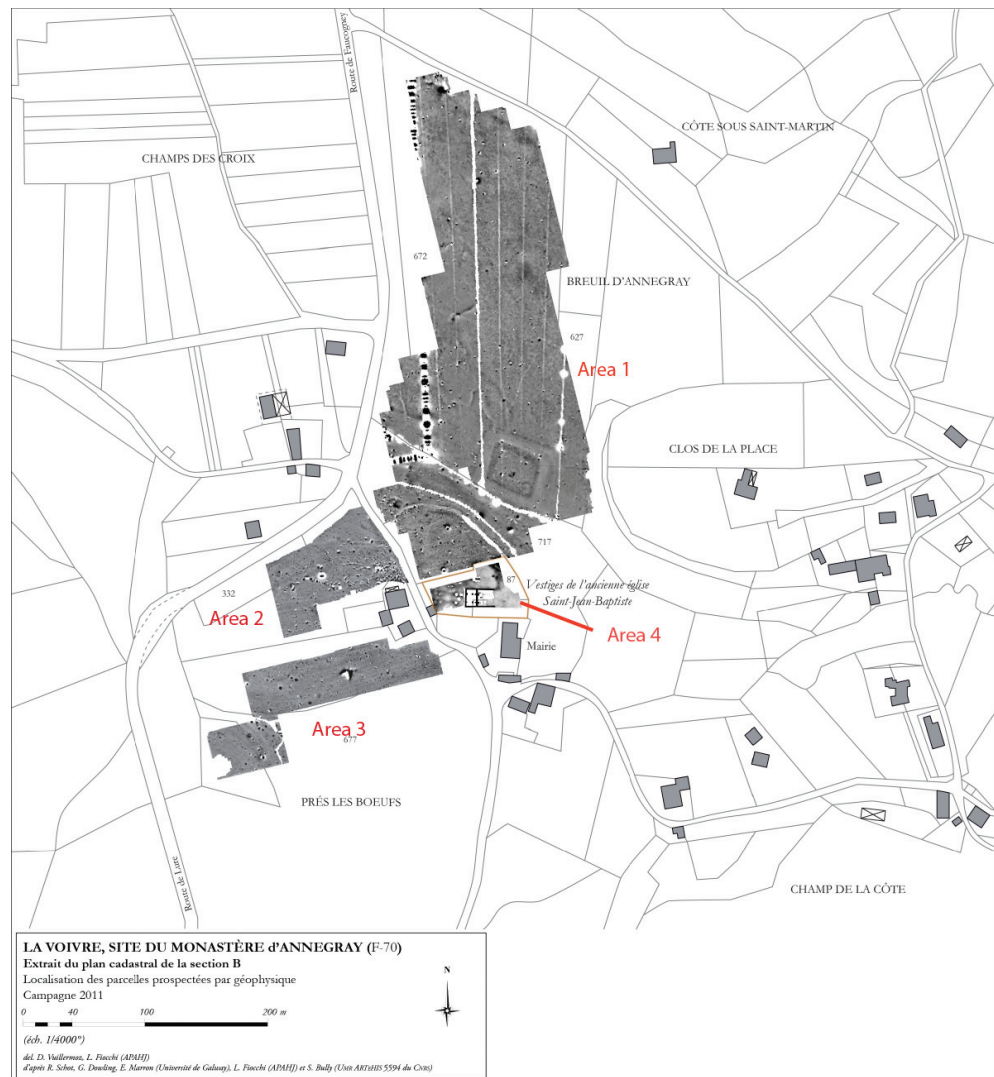


FIG. 3—Location of the geophysical prospection carried out in the vicinity of Annegray (© S. Bully and E. Marron, design L. Fiocchi).

the question at hand is that the curvilinear boundary does not seem to surround the church. While there is evidence for a slight continuation in Area 1, where it presents as a thin band of negative magnetic gradient, there is no trace of any such feature in Areas 2 and 3. Nor is there any evidence for any further concentric enclosures beyond the limit of the field boundary.

The tendency to view this boundary as an Irish-style enclosure (Stokes 1895) or to argue for an alternative location for the earliest monastery based on a similar curvilinear field boundary nearby (O'Hara 2015; above), fails to take into account the morphology of field boundaries in the Plateau des Mille Etangs region due to its unique geology. Historic Landscape Characterisation of the region currently underway has shown that curvilinear field boundaries are

common in the Annegray area. These forms developed over time to maximise the use of arable land on the many small rounded hills that characterise this moranic landscape: in most cases a limit was drawn at the point where the field system meets lower land more susceptible to flooding. The two curvilinear boundaries at Annegray conform to this pattern (Marron, forthcoming). Thus, there is no evidence to support the idea that Columbanus' monastery was delimited by a curvilinear enclosure. Even if it was, such a feature could not be considered a uniquely Irish characteristic (below).

A sub-rectangular feature ('Structure A'), was revealed by magnetic gradiometry in Area 1 and its presence was confirmed by resistivity (Fig. 4). It measured 65m x 50m and was delimited by a ditch thirteen metres wide. Possible interpretations included a Gallo-Roman ritual site, a Late Antique route-way fort (Brulet 2006)—an intriguing possibility in the light of Jonas' *castrum* (VC I: 6)—and a medieval moated site. The latter theory was confirmed through excavation, which showed that it was constructed in the twelfth century. Impressive levels of preservation in the base of the ditch provided a high volume of organic material, including the support posts for a bridge entrance, wooden tools, leather objects and a well-preserved fish trap (Marron and Bully 2017). It may have been a grange of Annegray or a residence of the emerging seigneurie of Annegray, for which we have the first accounts during this period. In either case, the fact that it is contemporary with the Romanesque church is intriguing

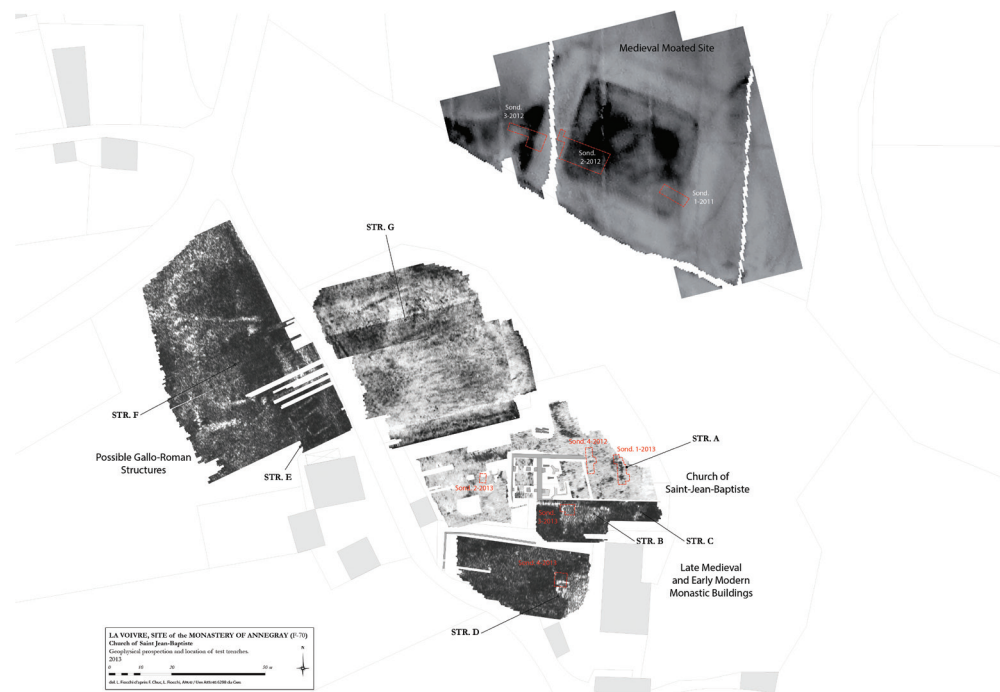


FIG. 4—Results of the electrical resistivity and GPR surveys carried out on the core area at Annegray (© S. Bully and E. Marron, design L. Fiocchi).

and gives an important insight into the long-term development of the monastery. In the pre-construction layers of the test-trench *tegulae* and *imbrices* dating to the fourth century AD were found reinforcing the picture outlined above of considerable activity in this part of the Breuchin Valley during Late Antiquity.

Following the initial survey, two further campaigns of geophysics were carried out in the core area in 2011 (electric resistivity) and 2013 (ground penetrating radar) (Fig. 4). Both techniques revealed the eastern and southern extents of the church, which were subsequently targeted by test trenches in the hope that they had been untouched by the 1950's excavation. A final, large-scale excavation of the eastern sector followed in 2014. The features identified through geophysics were shown to relate to the Romanesque church, a large three-aisled structure terminating in three semi-circular apses. As with the church of St Martin overlooking it, however, there are numerous indications of earlier phases of church building: the southern wall of the church was found to contain Carolingian spolia, while a prominently placed burial, located at the centre of the central apse, was dated to the tenth century (Bully and Marron 2015). This combined with the numerous Merovingian sarcophagi indicates several ecclesiastical phases.

In Area 2, ground penetrating radar survey revealed two sub-square structures, E and F. The latter, 39m x 26m, presents as two rectilinear anomalies, one inside the other. It is comparable to several monument types, from Gallo-Roman peribols to monastic cloisters to post-medieval farm enclosures. Structure E comprises a small trapezoidal anomaly enclosed by a slightly larger feature of similar shape, 14m x 6m. This is very reminiscent of a type of Gallo-Roman sanctuary commonly found throughout the Roman province of Sequania (Bully *et al.* 2016). However, it must be stated that this hypothesis needs to be tested through excavation.

Thus far no features relating to the earliest monastic phase have come to light. In spite of this, the evidence for earlier and later activity, combined with the wider landscape analysis, provides indirect insights into its character. If Structure E turns out to be a Gallo-Roman sanctuary it would have major implications for our understanding of the monastery. Already we can conclude that it was established and functioned in relation to a pre-existing settlement pattern, one in which there would seem to be earlier efforts to express the shift to Christianity. That Columbanus' monastery played a part in this ongoing process would chime with the picture emerging across eastern France and western Switzerland, where we see an initial phase of Christianisation of the rural landscape primarily articulated through the establishment of rather simple early churches at prominent sites in the landscape, or in the fabric of pre-existing Roman structures including pre-Christian cult sites (Terrier 2014; Delaplace 2015). Contrary to the traditional narrative which saw monasteries as the vanguard of Christianisation, it is increasingly apparent that their foundation takes place as part of this wider, ongoing process and reflects competition between episcopal and monastic powers (Schneider 2014). In many cases these monasteries are established on sites occupied during Late Antiquity, often with relatively

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Bobbio

brief periods of abandonment, if any; the reuse of existing structures contributes to their diversity of layout (Saint Mont – Remiremont; Romainmoutier) (C. Kraemer 2008; Eggenberger and Sarott 2010). Annegray seems to fit this model, as do Columbanus' later foundations.

Luxeuil

Jonas depicts Luxeuil as a deserted, pagan place:

He found a settlement that had once been well fortified about eight miles away from Annegray and which was known as Luxovium since ancient times. There were hot baths that had been built with great skill and many stone images that littered the nearby wood, which in ancient times of the pagans were honoured by the wretched worship and profane rites of the pagans....Only a multitude of wild animals and beasts, bears and buffaloes, and wolves haunted that place (VC I: 10).

Archaeological research has shown that the *castrum* of *Luxovium* actually represents one of the largest and most important settlements of the Roman province of *Sequania*; indeed it is the only example of a large scale Roman town in the modern department of Haute-Saône (Bonvalot and Card 1994; Faure-Brac 2002a). In addition to the baths complex alluded to by Jonas, the town (Fig. 5) produced a distinct form of *terra sigiliata* (Kahn 1991), and funerary *stellae* examples of which have been found throughout the surrounding region (Walter 1974). As we have seen, several important routes intersected here (Card 1995). The modern Rue Victor Genoux formed the *cardo maximus* of the Roman settlement, which was organised along a regular grid pattern with housing grouped together in *insulae*. During the third and fourth centuries, part of the town was surrounded by a series of walls in response to the increasing pressure along the nearby frontier and these considerable defences were most likely the basis for Jonas' use of the term *castrum* (Card and Bully 2015).

Test trenches in the centre of the sixteenth-century cloister, just to the east of the *cardo maximus*, revealed the remains of a large monumental building with a semi-circular apse housing the base for a statue or dais, which most likely held an administrative function during the Imperial period (Bully and Gaston 2007). A shift in focus took place during the second half of the fourth century, with the construction of a large monumental building in *opus africanum* style 50m to the north-west. The building style is significant for the few known examples of it north of the Alps are in early episcopal or ecclesiastical centres (Geneva, Tournai, Bonn: Dupuis 2008; Card and Bully 2015). This interpretation is supported by the appearance, from the seventh century onwards, of many inhumations and sarcophagi within the walls of the structure (Dupuis 2008). A further element in this possible early ecclesiastical complex more than likely lay under the present basilica of St Peter, where sarcophagi once again indicate the continuity from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.

The clearest evidence for early Christian activity has been discovered in the Place de la République. The earliest phase comprised a Roman *insula* which, lying



FIG. 5—Plan of Luxeuil showing the location of Late Antique and Early Medieval remains discovered during the course of archaeological work since 2006 (after Fiocchi, L. in Bully *et al.* 2014) (© S. Bully, design L. Fiocchi).

outside of the line of the fourth-century walls, was abandoned by the third quarter of the fourth century. Its remains were quickly reused to house an extramural necropolis, which by the start of the fifth century had taken the form of a small mausoleum with early Christian burials. During the earliest phase of the monastery this building was transformed into a funerary church for the monastic community. In the seventh century the remains of the third abbot, St Valbert, were placed in the apse and became a focus for *ad sanctos* burial (Bully *et al.* 2014).

In contrast to Annegray, there is an abundance of evidence relating to the earliest monastic phase. The most striking outcome of this research is the evidence for continuity, which contradicts Jonas' narrative. Not only was the *castrum* of Luxovium inhabited at the time of Columbanus' arrival, it seems to have been an important ecclesiastical centre (Bully *et al.* 2014). The nature of the relationship between the monastery and this pre-existing complex is still to be unpicked. Clearly, however, the foundation of both Luxeuil and Annegray necessitated negotiating a way into pre-existing social, religious and political networks. In both cases use was made of pre-existing infrastructure and extant

structures (Bully and Marron, forthcoming). In this regard, they have much in common with a plethora of early monasteries in Gaul, where Late Antique rustic dwellings were repurposed to house religious communities (Sapin 2008). There is nothing in the material excavated to date that would suggest any ‘Irish’ influence on the layout or buildings of either monastery. Instead the picture that emerges is of communities adeptly appropriating the resources available to them in a manner which was no doubt facilitated by the fact that, from an early stage, they included Frankish as well as Irish members.

Bobbio

Columbanus’ sojourn in Frankia was cut short by mounting tensions between the Irish monk and his royal patrons. Leaving behind the Frankish lands troubled by civil war, Columbanus eventually made his way to the Lombard Kingdom, where once again he demonstrated his ability to ingratiate himself with the highest power in the land. Although most of his followers were Arian, the Lombard king Agilulf viewed the zealous outsider as a useful tool in his strategy to promote the Catholic faith and to resist the advances, both religious and political, of the Exarchate of Ravenna (Zironi 2004, 3). As a result, Columbanus was once again granted land by royal approval:

At that time a man named Jocundus comes to the king and tells him that he knew of a basilica of blessed Peter...in the solitude of the Appennine countryside. He knew by experience that miracles took place there... Ancient tradition called it Bobbio on account of the stream with this name that flows in this place and which joins another river called the Trebbia, on the banks of which Hannibal once, while passing the winter there, suffered severe loss of men, horses and elephants (VC I: 30).

Once again Jonas’ description of the *desertum* is interspersed with allusions to the reality of the context. There is a nod to the importance of the valley in which Bobbio was located as a strategic pass during Antiquity. More importantly, he mentions a pre-existing church, something which he failed to do in relation to Annegray and Luxeuil. His description of Columbanus repairing the church and making it the focal point of his new foundation chimes with the appropriation of pre-existing structures evident from archaeological research at these earlier foundations. His description of Bobbio as a place of solitude has been brought into question by recent work carried out by the *Columbanus’ Life and Legacy* project and its collaborators. Geophysical prospection has been carried out by both French and Irish teams, along with a test trench in the interior of the abbey church (Pl. III) (Destefanis and Conversi 2015). Remains of the earliest phase have proved elusive, not surprising given the built-up nature of the site. However, a picture of the context in which the monastery was established has emerged by considering its landscape setting (Fig. 6).

Located on the eastern flank of the Apennine Mountains, Bobbio lies in the middle section of the Trebbia Valley, a relatively narrow basin which leads



Pl. III—Magnetic gradiometry survey underway at Bobbio, with the Abbatial church in the background (author's photo.)

down to the Po plain. The settlement takes advantage of a naturally terraced shelf overlooking the river Trebbia, meaning that it can make the most of the river's potential without the risk of flooding during heavy autumn rains. The land surrounding the town is some of the most fertile in the Trebbia Valley, and is also relatively open and flat (Marchetti and Dall'Algio 1990).

Not only is the site well-located in terms of exploiting natural resources, Destefanis has demonstrated that it also lies on an important routeway across the Apennines. The role played by this valley, both in Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, in connecting Piacenza and Genova is clear from place names and small finds (Destefanis 2002, 9–16). The second-century *Tabula Alimentaria* records a plethora of farming communities in the fertile lands flanking the Trebbia river (Criniti 1991; Bottazzi 2013). At Bobbio this major northeast-southwest route intersects with the Passo del Penice, a route connecting the important Lombard centres of Tortona and Pavia with northern Tuscany, as well as several minor routes into neighbouring valleys. In the decades preceding the foundation of the monastery, the valleys in this area were of particular interest to Lombard rulers attempting to shore up their newly-conquered territories, for the lands they led to on the southwest flank of the Apennines, in modern day Liguria, were still held by the Exarchate of Ravenna (Destefanis 2011; Catarsi and Raggio 2017, 320).



FIG. 6—The location of Bobbio within the northern Apennines. (Produced using: Copernicus data and information by the European Union - EU-DEM layers and ESRI ‘World Topographic Map’ Feb 19, 2012. <http://arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=30e5fe3149c34df1ba922e6f5bbf808f> (25 Feb, 2018).

An example of the shift from Roman agricultural zone to Lombard militarised front line can be seen at Piana di San Martino in Pianello Val Tidone. Occupied during the Bronze and Iron Ages, the site was re-occupied during the first centuries AD and saw a phase of defensive building during the fifth century AD, when the settlement was concentrated in a fortified area on the highest ground (Conversi *et al.* 2015, 107). During the second half of the sixth century a wooden building—interpreted as a blacksmith’s workshop—was erected, coinciding with a rise in the amount of weaponry produced at the site. This phase also saw the development of a necropolis, notable for the east-west orientation of the inhumations and the lack of grave goods. The focal point for this necropolis is a small stone-built structure with an apse, located under the subsequent fifteenth century church of St Martin (Conversi and Destefanis 2014, 300). The shift in activity at this site illustrates the importance of these valley passes to the fledgling Lombard kingdom. It shows how they were used to shore up this frontier zone through a mix of military, trade and religious mechanisms (Conversi 2017, 298–299).

Similar dynamics have also recently been revealed in the Trebbia Valley itself. During antiquity Travo was the site of a temple dedicated to the goddess Minerva Medica (Dall’Alglio and Marchetti 2003). Excavations around

Sant'Andrea di Travo have revealed continuity of habitation on the site from Late Antiquity to the early medieval period. During the late sixth and early seventh centuries there is a shift to construction in mudbrick and wood, with several large structures erected south of the former pagan temple. As at Pianello, this area also became the focal point of a necropolis characterised by east-west burials without funerary goods (Conversi and Mezzadri 2014). In the north-eastern sector of the necropolis, at a distance from the main concentration of inhumations, a single burial was found close to the remains of a mudbrick and wooden building, orientated east-west, with an apse feature on the eastern end. Here, it seems, is a privileged burial, in close proximity to an apsed building on a site with a toponym which recalls a local fourth-century martyr (Conversi and Destefanis 2014, 304; Tosi 1982). Like that at Piano val Tidone, this likely church was built by the middle of the seventh century at the latest, though it is not clear whether they were preceded by, or were contemporary with, Columbanus' monastery. In addition, there is evidence that the bishopric of Tortona established other rural churches at sites such as Voghera in the Staffora Valley through which the Passo del Penice runs towards Bobbio (Mennella 1998; Destefanis 2002, 25–26; Zironi 2004, 3). This suggests that the monastery at Bobbio was just one component in a complex, multifaceted process of Christianisation, that had begun long before Columbanus' arrival.

As we have seen, the *Vita Columbani* makes no attempt to hide the presence of a pre-existing church; but his assertion that it was in ruins and required restoration by the saint is cast in some doubt by the picture emerging from the valley. In the first century BC brick-making was carried out in the immediate vicinity of Bobbio, the bricks stamped with the identifier '*VIPPONT*' (Rigato 2010). The same name occurs on a funeral stella held in the Abbey museum: a M(arcus) Vipponius is recorded as *magister* of what was most likely a *vicus*, located on this important crossroads (Destefanis 2002). This would seem to correlate with the recording of a '*fundus Vipponianus*' on the *Tabula Alimentaria* of Veleia (Conversi 2017; Bottazzi 2013). One of the primary economic activities at this settlement seems to have been the exploitation of brine springs in the immediate hinterland (Destefanis 2002). These springs feature prominently in King Agilulf's land grant to Columbanus (*CLA*, 10a 61): the document indicates that they were still in use by a certain Sundrarit, a prominent Lombard general who most likely received this valuable resource as a reward for victories over Byzantine forces (Zironi 2004, 17; Richter 2008, 13).

Bobbio, then, was established in a landscape that was not only well-settled but would have required considerable political skill to navigate, given its strategic importance and the presence of earlier and contemporary churches. Analysis of the sizeable corpus of early medieval carved stonework and terracotta from the site showed it to be consistent with contemporary sites in central and northern Italy (Destefanis 2004). There is nothing which would suggest Irish influence and, in light of the emerging picture from Columbanus' other foundations, this should come as no surprise.

Conclusion

This discussion took as its starting point the expectation, expressed by authors from Stokes (1895) to O'Hara (2015), that Columbanus' monasteries would have a typically Irish layout due to the origin of their founder. This assumes a clear-cut dichotomy between Irish and continental monasteries. However, recent work has demonstrated that characteristics once considered peculiarly Irish may also have been commonplace on the continent. Hamage, for example, which is defined by a rectangular bank and ditch enclosure with a wooden palisade, has several small circular wooden dwellings in its earliest phase, interpreted by the excavator as cells, as well as a large rectangular wooden church (Louis 1999). Bede's assertion that the construction of churches in wood was a particularly Irish practice (*morem Scottorum*) has long been held up as an indicator of the uniqueness of the Irish religious architecture. However, wooden churches were much more common on the continent than previously thought, as demonstrated by numerous excavations in western Switzerland and supported by a number of sites in the Frankish heartlands, such as Saleux and Tournedos (Bonnet 1997; Terrier 2014). The growing body of continental examples means that, even if a simple wooden church was revealed at one of Columbanus' foundations, it would be simplistic to assume that it is indicative of an Irish architectural tradition.

The effects of subsequent construction are an issue in discerning the form of monastic enclosures in France: later intensive occupation often masks the outline of the earliest phase. However, the presence of circular enclosing elements at Nivelles (Chantinne 2015) and Romainmôtier (Eggenberger and Sarott 2010), as well as a significant number of rural parochial sites, makes clear that this feature cannot be considered to indicate Irish influence (James 1981; Creissen *et al.* 2008; Gillon 2004). The futility of seeking to identify 'Irish' characteristics at continental sites is underscored by excavations at Jumièges, one of the sites closely linked to the cult of Columbanus, which revealed a rectilinear enclosing feature, possibly the reused remains of a Roman fort (Le Maho 2003). Rather than approach the archaeological record with pre-conceived ideas of 'Irishness', it is more useful to consider the immediate resources and needs of a fledgling community, as well as local settlement trends. As noted above, recent research has raised questions about the features traditionally considered characteristic of Irish monastic foundations. Even if we were to accept certain traits as 'Irish', it is notable that none of these have been found at any of the sites founded by Columbanus in France or Italy. Instead, his monasteries were founded in inhabited landscapes that were already undergoing a process of Christianisation long before his arrival. Where remains have been revealed, they bear strong similarities to the cultural context in which they were built.

The image emerging from the landscape study of Bobbio points to a community that depended on a pre-existing political, economic and religious milieu for its survival and to fill its burgeoning ranks. The same dynamic is evident in the archaeological record and landscape context of Columbanus' earlier monasteries at Annegray and Luxeuil. Their success was based on their ability to appropriate resources in the territories where they were granted land and to integrate themselves into substantial communities whose presence is down-played or denied by hagiography. When we place the archaeological evidence alongside

the textual, the picture of Columbanus that emerges is that of a master appropriator skilfully inserting his monasteries into longstanding networks which in turn shaped the character of these sites. Instead of a vain search for Irish traits, future research would be better served by comparing these sites with contemporary monasteries in the lands in which they were founded.

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