

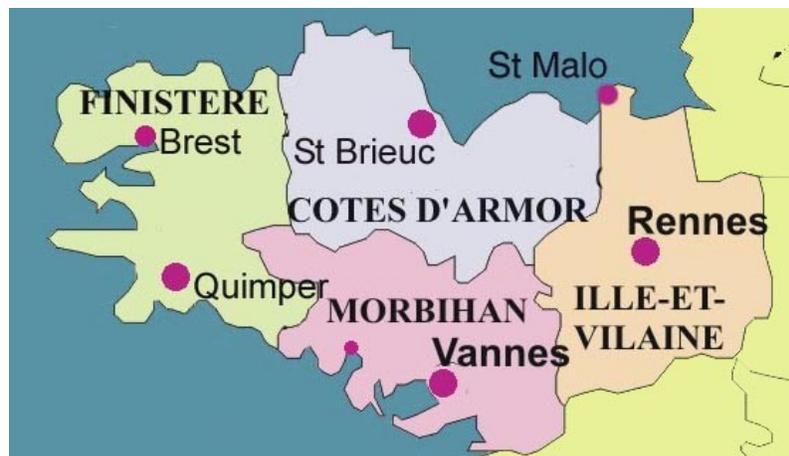
Orthodox Brittany

We valiant Bretons love our Homeland,
This Armorica which everywhere comes first,
For its sake our forebears shed their blood
In order to repel barbarity.

First Verse of the Breton National Anthem

Introduction

Over the decades I have spent over a year of my life in Brittany and much appreciate it. Physically it resembles Wales and Cornwall and I am assured by a Welsh speaker that although it was not easy for him to understand a Breton speaker, nevertheless he could just cope, somewhat as a Frenchman can half-understand an Italian. Brittany is the first Celtic colony and became so in the Age of the Saints. Later, the confusion between the coloniser and the colonised became such that it came to be known as Lesser (= Smaller) Britain and the old world as Great (= Larger) Britain.



The five Départements of Modern Brittany

Why did this colonisation take place in the peninsula that formerly had been known as Armorica? Some have speculated that on the one hand there was the arrival of the English in the East of Britain, on the other hand, even before this, there was the arrival of the Irish in the West. Squeezed between the two, they would say that the Britons of what is now called Wales, headed south. However, there is a more fundamental reason which lies behind all this.

Emigration to Brittany

This fundamental reason lies in the collapse of Roman administration in Britain after 410, leaving the native Britons unprotected. Indeed, the Welsh called and still call themselves ‘Cymry’ – fellow-countrymen. Only the English called them ‘Welsh’, that is ‘foreigners’. Thus, the movement of the Britons from Wales across the ‘Severn Sea’ to Cornwall (literally meaning, ‘Wales in the horn-shaped peninsula’) and from there to Armorica (and to a lesser extent to what is now Galicia in north-west Spain) began in about 450 and extended over at least two centuries. In other words, it began well before there was any real pressure on them from English settlers migrating from northern Continental Europe.



The British Isles and Brittany

This movement is proved by historical, linguistic and place-name evidence. The British emigrants settled in the then thickly-forested interior of the Armorican peninsula, taken there by their ethnic leaders, by churchmen – the saints. They gave their names to the western half of the Armorican peninsula, between saint Briec and Vannes, which became wholly British- (Breton-) speaking, unlike the eastern half, where Breton was basically never spoken. Thus, the northern coasts of Armorica, to the west of Saint Briec, were called Domnonia (Devon), the south-western coast, around Quimper, Cornouaille (Cornwall).

The half-submerged coastline of Brittany is surrounded by islands and is very ragged. The resulting islands, peninsulas and inlets were the natural means of access and penetration for the settlers of the Age of the Saints. They landed first on offshore islands, and the hermits naturally tarried there or on the shore, as chapels dedicated to them and standing to this day, prove. Only then did they move inland.

Those Britons who migrated from south-east Wales and eastern Cornwall settled largely on the northern coasts of Armorica, those from south-west Wales and western Cornwall settled on the southern coasts. We know this because a very large number of those who left their names on the northern coasts came from the Glamorgan monastery of St Illtud (+ early 6th century) at Llanilltud Fawr in south Wales. These include St Samson of Dol (+ 565), St Gildas of Rhuy (c. 570) and St Paulinus (Paul Aurelian - + 6th century). Another group with Welsh (and also Irish)

associations based themselves on the Bréhat group of islands off the coast of St Malo. St Mawes (Maudez - + 5th century?) belonged to this group. Finally, a third group settled in the north – they claimed descent from St Brychan (+ c.500?).



Modern Wales

1. [Clwyd](#)
2. [Dyfed](#)
3. [Gwent](#)
4. [Gwynedd](#)
5. [Mid Glamorgan](#)
6. [South Glamorgan](#)
7. [West Glamorgan](#)
8. [Powys](#)

St Samson

St Samson holds the main place among the founders of the immigrant Church in Brittany. Unlike many other Lives, his Life, which is long and full, was written relatively soon after his repose, perhaps as early as 625. A native of south-west Wales, born perhaps in about the year 500 and with an Old Testament name like St David, he was educated at St Illtud's monastery (Llaniltud Fawr) and ordained there by the future St Dubricius (+ c. 550). He became Abbot of Piro on Caldey Island off the coast of Dyfed.



Caldey Island

Later, Abbot Samson visited Ireland and then lived as a hermit on the banks of the Severn. Returning to Llaniltud, he was consecrated bishop and set off to Brittany, crossing Cornwall from north to south, from Padstow to Falmouth. On his way he converted one of the pagan standing stones or pillars of the native Celts into a cross and preached. He may have travelled via the Channel Islands, as there is a church dedicated to him on Guernsey – unless this commemorates a later visit there from Brittany.



Cornwall

In Brittany St Samson is famous as the founder of Dol and several other monasteries and churches. He also visited the Frankish King Childebert (511-558) in Paris and signed decrees of Church councils held there. It is clear from churches dedicated to him that he had a wide influence, well outside what we call Brittany and in fact little influence in the extreme west of Brittany, Finistère ('Land's End').

St Samson was a skilled political negotiator and for this used the help of one of his deacons, also a close relative, St Méen (Mewan), after whom the town of St Méen le Grand in central Brittany is named and who also founded the monastery of Gael. These were in forested areas in central Brittany and demonstrate how the Gospel was spread from the coasts inland. He had come from Archenfield, the borderland between present-day Wales and England, the south-west Powys area and eastwards into England, which was also the home of St Dubricius. Many others seem to have gone to Brittany from this area.

St Gildas

The next saint to concern us is St Gildas (+ 547). He was the author of a unique document, *De Excidio Britanniae*, an indictment written in prophetic style against five corrupt native rulers of Britain in about 540. His life was written in the early ninth century. He is said to have come from an area that is now near Glasgow on the banks of the Clyde in south-west Scotland. Forced to move south by the invasion of heathen Irish and Picts (a Celtic tribe based in the north of Scotland but which moved southwards), he also became a monk at Llaniltud Fawr.

After this he emigrated to Brittany and, landing on the island of Houat, he then went to the coast and founded his chief monastery in the south-east of the country at Rhuys near Vannes. Houat remained a place of retreat and it is said that St Gildas reposed there. Although no church is dedicated to St Gildas in Wales, there are many dedicated to members of his family, brothers, sisters, sons and grandsons, not forgetting his grandfather St Geraint and his uncle St Solomon (Selevan). From these we have the impression that his family migrated from south Wales through eastern Cornwall into Brittany, using river valleys where possible.

St Paulinus

The next case is St Paulinus, the Roman-named Paul Aurelian. He seems to have migrated from further west in Wales and through western Cornwall to north-west Brittany, where there are several churches and chapels dedicated to him, including the cathedral city of Pol de Léon. Again we have a relatively early Life, dating to about 880. This is divided into two parts, his early life in inland south Wales near Llanwrthwl on the River Tywi, and his later life in Brittany. In about 525 he migrated together with twelve priests from Llanddeusant to Cornwall and from there to Brittany.

On the coast north of Brest, Léon lies directly across the channel from southern Cornwall, where there is the parish of Paul, and would have been a natural landing place. However, according to the life, the saint landed first on the island of Ushant (Ouessant) off the west coast of Finistère. Interestingly, the centre richest in traditions about him is also an offshore island, the Ile de Batz. It may well be that, as in the case of St Gildas, the saint landed on one of these islands first, founded a monastery, and only then went to the mainland and founded the monastery at Léon, now Saint Pol de Léon. He reposed on Batz in 594.

St Mawes (Maudez)

The eleventh-century life of St Mawes claims, improbably, that he was born in Ireland. According to this, he withdrew to the island of Ile Modez ('Mawes' Island') in the Bréhat archipelago in the Gulf of Saint Brieuc. Here he seems to have founded a monastery together with Sts Budoc and Tudy and perhaps others. Over sixty dedications to him show a spectacular pattern spreading out from Ile Modez. Veneration for him later spread all over western and northern France.

This later life is less trustworthy and it is notable that his name Maudez is not at all Irish, but typically Welsh. Although there is a chapel to him in south-west Dyfed, the dedication to him in Cornwall is located side by side with a dedication to St Budoc. This is exactly mirrored on the Ile Modez, where there is a chapel dedicated to St Budoc. Interestingly St Budoc is connected with a Roman villa, repaired by immigrants in the fifth century, on the island of Lavré in the Bréhat group. With the remains of eight round cells in a row and signs of others, it is significant to note that both this monastic plan and the name Lavré comes directly from the Syrian 'laura', or large monastery, which dates from the fourth and fifth centuries. This must be one of the first Orthodox monasteries in the West.

St Winwaloe (Guénolé)

Born from the second generation in Brittany the sixth century near the Gulf of Saint Brieuc, St Winwaloe was a disciple of St Budoc at Lavré. His Life, written in the ninth century, describes how later he became a hermit on another nearby island called Tibidy. Here he practised the common ascetic practices of reciting the Psalter daily with his arms outstretched and dressed in clothes of goat-hair.

Later he founded the monastery of Landévennec (the llan, or church, of Winwaloe) on the coasts of western Finistère, where he became abbot and which became very famous. Interestingly, veneration for him spread into south-western Cornwall and south Wales and later up the coasts of northern France and into southern England. This is an interesting case of veneration for second generation British saints returning to their parents' homeland.

Veneration of the Saints in Brittany Today

Bretons love pilgrimages, known as 'pardons'. However, the greatest Breton pilgrimage of olden times and now revived is called 'Tro-Breiz' – 'The Tour of Brittany', since it covers the area where Breton was once the universal first language.



Tro-Breiz

This pilgrimage concerns the seven monk-bishops who, it is considered, founded the Church of Brittany. The seven saints and the towns where veneration for them is based are:

Saint Briec: St Brioc (Briec), born at latest in the very early sixth century, came from Cardigan in Wales, emigrated through Cornwall (St Breock) and founded St Briec in northern Brittany where he looked after some twenty monks.

Saint Malo: St Malo (Maclou), born in Wales in the sixth century, was born on the day of the resurrection, emigrated to Brittany and is known as the apostle of Brittany. He is commemorated above all by the large city of St Malo on the north-east coast. He reposed between 620 and 650, but his Life, as we have it now, was written in the ninth century.

Dol: St Samson (see above).



Pilgrims in Brittany Today

Vannes: St Paternus (Patern) was not from Wales, but a fifth-century Gallo-Roman who became Bishop of Vannes, reposing before 500.



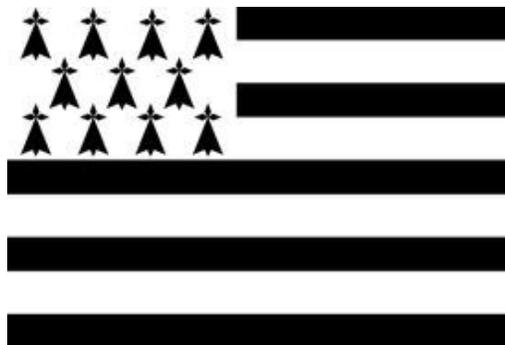
Breton Women in Costume

Quimper: St Corentin was a hermit who became the first Bishop of Cornouaille (Cornwall), of which the centre is Quimper in south-west Finistère. He may have reposed as early as 460 or 480 and must certainly have come from Wales.

Saint Pol de Leon: St Paulinus (see above).

Tréguier: St Tugdual (Tudwal) was the nephew of St Brioc. Born in Wales, he emigrated to the Léon area of northern Brittany where he landed with monks and a large family, probably in 532. He founded a monastery at Lan Pabu ('the church of Tugdual'), where he had 72 disciples. In 542 he became a bishop at Tréguier. He is famed as a healer. His name is also found around Cardigan Bay in south-west Wales, notably at St Tudwal's Island.

Conclusion



The Breton Flag

Today the Breton language is spoken as a native language only by some 40,000 Bretons in the far west of Finistère. Many of these are aged. Integrated into France, Brittany faces all the usual problems of a secularised Western European country. In order to counter them, to ‘repel barbarity’, its only hope is to keep something of its ancient national identity – and this can only be in guarding the sacred memory of its saints.

All the Saints of Brittany, pray to God for the Breton land and for all of us!