



Mensa in Deserto: Reconciling Jonas's Life of Columbanus with recent archaeological discoveries at Annegray and Luxeuil

Sébastien Bully, J.-M. Picard

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TRANSFORMING
LANDSCAPES OF BELIEF
IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL
INSULAR WORLD AND BEYOND

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS
IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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VOLUME 23

TRANSFORMING
LANDSCAPES OF BELIEF
IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL
INSULAR WORLD AND BEYOND

Converting the Isles II

Edited by

Nancy Edwards, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh,
and Roy Flechner



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Part II

The Power of the Word



MENSA IN DESERTO: RECONCILING JONAS'S LIFE OF COLUMBANUS WITH RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES AT ANNEGRAY AND LUXEUIL

Sébastien Bully and Jean-Michel Picard

Introduction

Apart from Columbanus's own writings,¹ the *Vita Columbani* is certainly the most important document for the history of the monastic movement associated with his name. It was written in the early 640s, only one generation after the death of the saint in 615, by Jonas, a monk at Bobbio. Even though Jonas had direct contact with the disciples and successors of Columbanus in both Lombard and Frankish territories, modern scholarship has taught us to be extremely careful about accepting his testimony at face value, and the past thirty years have produced a series of important articles showing how Jonas manipulated facts, chronology, and even proper names, in order to present his own vision of history.² The aim of this article is to compare and contrast the narrative found in Jonas's *Vita Columbani* with recent archaeological evidence

¹ Columbanus, *Letters*, ed. and trans. by Walker.

² The following major articles, 1982–2012, illustrate this point: Wood, 'The *Vita Columbani* and Merovingian Hagiography'; Rohr, 'Hagiographie als historische Quelle'; Wood, 'Jonas, the Merovingians, and Pope Honorius'; Stancliffe, 'Jonas's Life of Columbanus and his Disciples'; O'Hara, 'The *Vita Columbani* in Merovingian Gaul'; Helvétius, 'Hagiographie et réformes monastiques'.

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discovered in France at the first two monastic sites founded by Columbanus. The first foundation in 590 or 591 was Annegray, on the north-eastern border of the kingdom of Burgundy, followed shortly afterwards by the foundation of Luxeuil, which was to become Columbanus's main monastery in that area. New research in Luxeuil has been ongoing since 2005 when Sébastien Bully, under the aegis of the Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives, undertook the first archaeological excavation in the Place de la République, leading to the discovery of a Merovingian church and a large number of sarcophagi, both inside and outside the church.³ Subsequently, further excavations were undertaken under the aegis of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) which have recently been published.⁴ The research on Annegray began in 2010 and is being carried out by CNRS (UMR, ArTeHiS)⁵ under the leadership of Sébastien Bully in collaboration with the National University of Ireland, Galway, as part of the *Columbanus's Life and Legacy* project, directed by Conor Newman and Mark Stansbury. The important role of our Irish colleagues must be highlighted, especially that of Emmet Marron, who completed his doctoral thesis under the supervision of the project directors on the question of the landscape of Annegray.⁶ The research on Annegray combines the methods of landscape archaeology with those of archaeological stratigraphy.

Annegray: The Ideal of the Desert?

The historian looking for the physical reality of the early foundations of Columbanus at Annegray and Luxeuil must be conscious of the literary context and of the rhetoric used by Jonas. In presenting Columbanus as a model for the Christians of his time, Jonas followed a long tradition which started in Cappadocia and Egypt but was still very much alive in Gaul and Ireland in the sixth and seventh centuries, where eremitic life in the desert was presented as the ideal way of life and the gateway through which to become closer to God.⁷ Along with the ideal of the desert goes the ideal of *rusticitas* or simplicity,

³ Bully, 'Luxeuil-les-Bains (Haute-Saône)'.

⁴ Bully and others, 'Les Origines du monastère de Luxeuil'.

⁵ UMR = Unité Mixte de Recherche; ArTeHiS = Archéologie, Terres, Histoire, Sociétés. See details on <<http://artehis.u-bourgogne.fr/>>.

⁶ Marron, 'In His Silvis Silere'. Some of the results presented here are derived from this work.

⁷ See Picard, 'Miles insulanus'.

where all luxury and the trappings of refined civilization are rejected in favour of the simple life of nature. Jonas begins to develop this theme in the prologue of his work. The metaphors that he uses to compare his simple prose to the more polished works of the rhetoricians of Gaul and Italy are significant and are indicative of the ethos promoted in Columbanian circles, with its emphasis in harsh asceticism, as opposed to the softer way of life offered by a wealthier diocesan Church:

Illi dites balsami lacrimam ex Ingadi, floresque aromatum ex Arabia, nobis ex Hibernia uix butyrum pinguescit. Illi piper nardumque sumunt ex India, nobis pennifera iuga Pennina uaga, quo zyphiriis rigescunt frigora flabris, uix tandem saliuncam praebent. Illi praeciosi lapidis uarietate gloriantur, nobis temerarium uidetur Galliae succino gloriari. Illi poma palmarum magnopere peregrina dirigunt, nobis iuxta poetam sunt mitia molles castaneae poma.

[They have in abundance teardrops of Engaddi balm and flowers of aromatic herbs from Arabia, but we have Irish butter that is barely fat. They get pepper and nard from India, but for us the evanescent summits of the Pennine Alps covered in pines, where frost is hardened by windy blasts, hardly manage to grow valerian. They boast of the variety of their precious stones, but for us it would seem rash to boast of the Gallic amber. They earnestly display the exotic fruit of palm trees, but we have, as the poet says, the soft fruit of the sweet chestnut.]⁸

The description of the arrival of Columbanus at Annegray is written in a similar mode:

Erat enim tunc vasta heremus Vosagus nomine, in qua castrum dirutum olim quod antiquorum traditio Anagrates nuncupabant. Ad quod vir sanctus cum venisset, licet aspera vastitate solitudinis et scopulorum interpositione loca, ibi cum suis resedit, parvo alimentorum solamine contentus.⁹

[At that time there was a vast wilderness called the Vosges, where there was a fort, long ago demolished and called Annegray, according to an antique tradition. When the holy man arrived there, although the place was rough, on account of the expanse of wilderness and the impediment of rocks, he settled there with his followers, making do with a small food allowance.]

⁸ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, Prologue, St Gall MS 553, p. 7 (see Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ed. by Krusch, p. 148). Rather than the text emended by Krusch, the oldest manuscript, St Gall MS 553, is used here. All translations from the Latin are by Jean-Michel Picard.

⁹ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, ch. 6, St Gall MS 553, p. 27 (see Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ed. by Krusch, p. 163).

In the subsequent chapters on Annegray, Jonas insists on the wildness and isolation of the place by the repeated use of evocative terms like *eremus*, *solitudo*, *saltus*, *uastitas*, or *uastus*.¹⁰ He also mentions *scopula* and *saxa*, the rocks that are an impediment to travel and agriculture.¹¹ The reference in the description of Columbanus's arrival to ancient lore and old ruins evokes the eerie image of the abandoned dwellings of a lost civilization. Furthermore, the only living beings likely to be met in this wilderness are wolves and Suevi (or Swabians), all of whom were roaming the area and ready to kill:

Hisdemque in locis euenit ut per opaca saltus inter deuia isdem uir Dei deambulare [...]. Dumque haec animo uolueret, conspicit xii lupos aduenire et dextra leuaque se medius astare [...]. Cumque haud procul abisset, audit uocem multorum Sueuorum per auia oberrantium, qui eo in tempore hisdem in locis latrocinia exercebant [...]. Rursumque secessit a cellula, longiorique uia uasta heremi penetrans, reperit saxum inmane pruruptaque rupis latera, aspera scopulis terga, auia hominibus.¹²

[In the same area, it happened that the holy man was walking through dark remote paths in the wood [...]. And while he was turning this over in his mind, he saw twelve wolves approaching and surrounding him from right and left [...]. And before he had gone far, he heard the voices of many Suevi, wandering in these remote areas and who at that time were committing robberies in this region [...]. Again he left his monastery and, entering the vast wilderness through a very long road, he found an immense rock with precipitous cliffs. It was covered with sharp rocks, making it inaccessible to men.]

This description fits perfectly into the context of the Irish *peregrinatio pro Christo* where, having cut all ties with society, the holy man offers his life to Christ and expects a violent death.¹³

However, Jonas also provides evidence that the Annegray area was not entirely desert and was accessible to other men. One instance is the arrival of a man with horses and enough provisions to feed Columbanus's community:

¹⁰ Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ch. 8, ed. by Krusch, pp. 166–67. In Latin, all these terms convey the idea of a wilderness, devoid of human presence: *eremus* ('desert'); *solitudo* ('solitude'); *saltus* ('wooded area'); *uastitas* ('desert, waste land'); *uastus* ('deserted, unpopulated, abandoned').

¹¹ *Scopulus* ('rock'): six occurrences in Jonas, *Vita Columbani* (chs 6, 8, 9, 12, 27, 30); *saxum* ('rock, large stone'): three occurrences (chs 8, 9, 30).

¹² Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, ch. 8, St Gall MS 553, pp. 31–33 (see Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ed. by Krusch, pp. 166–67).

¹³ On the theme of *peregrinatio*, see Picard, 'Saints aquitains et irlandais'.

Tertia iam die peracto ieiunio nihil habentibus unde fessa corpora reficerentur, subito conspiciunt uirum quendam cum panum supplimento uel pulmentorum aequos oneratos ante fores adstare, qui se referebat subita cordis ammonitione actum, ut eis ex sua substantia subueniret, qui tantam egestatem pro Christo in heremo sustinerent.¹⁴

[Having now fasted for three days and having nothing to refresh their wearied bodies, suddenly they saw a man standing before their gates with horses loaded with a supply of bread and cooked meat. He said that he had been led by a sudden impulse of his heart to bear aid from his own substance to those who were, for Christ's sake, suffering from so great poverty in the wilderness.]

The man knew about their existence and had decided to give a substantial donation to the community of monks. Several horses are involved, and the volume of food implies the presence of a nearby agricultural population capable of producing a surplus in their annual crop. The other instance of human activity is the mention of food relief sent by a monastic community living in the same area and led by a Breton abbot named Carantoc:

Monuitque per uisum abbatem quendam nomine Carantocum, qui monasterio, cui Salicis nomen est, preerat, ut famulo suo Columbae intra heremi uastitate consistente necessaria deferret. Expergefactus igitur Carantocus, cellerarium suum Marculfum nomine uocat, reique ammonitae causam narrat. At ille: 'Fac', inquit, 'ut imperatum est tibi'. Iubet ergo Carantocus Marculfum ire, et omnia quae posset parare beato Columbano deferre. Oneratis ergo Marculus uehiculis iter arripit, sed, cum solitudinis ora ategit, uiam sibi pandi itineris nequaquam repperit. Fuit tandem consilii, ut si in hoc Dei esset imperium, praemissis aequitibus imperantis potentia uiam aperiret. Mira uirtus! antecedentes aequi ignotum iter ungula calle terent, rectoque itinere ante fores beati Columbani ad Anagrates perueniunt. Mirans Marculus, aequorum uestigia subsecutus ad uirum Dei peruenit et quae detulerat praesentat. Ille grates conditori rependit, qui sic suis famulis in deserto parare mensam non distulit. Accepta ergo ab eo benedictione, Marculus calle quo uenerat repetauit, omnibus rei geste causam patefecit.¹⁵

[A certain abbot, named Carantoc, who ruled over a monastery which was called Salicis, was warned by a vision, that he should bear the necessities of life to God's servant Columbanus, dwelling in the vast expanse of the wilderness. So, as Carantoc rose, he called his cellarer, Marculf by name, and told him what he had been warned

¹⁴ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, ch. 7, St Gall MS 553, p. 28 (see Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ed. by Krusch, p. 164).

¹⁵ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, ch. 7, St Gall MS 553, pp. 30–31 (see Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ed. by Krusch, pp. 165–66).

about. The latter replied: 'Do as you have been ordered'. So, Carantoc ordered Marculf to go and prepare everything that he could, to carry to St Columbanus. So, Marculf loaded his wagons and started out. But when the hour of darkness arrived, he sought in vain for a way to continue his journey. However, he thought that if the command was from God, the power of the Commander would show the way to the horses, if they were left to their own guidance. Wonderful power! The horses, advancing, followed an unknown road and in a direct course proceeded to Annegray to the gates of blessed Columbanus. Marculf, amazed, followed the tracks of the horses, came to the man of God and presented what he had brought. The latter gave thanks to his Creator because He did not neglect to prepare a table for His servants in the wilderness. So, having received a benediction from him, Marculf returned the way he had come and related to all what had happened.]

This time the food was brought by heavy carts (*uehacula*), which supposes the existence of a road, or at least tracks wide enough and properly maintained, to allow for the circulation of vehicles.

A closer study of the landscape at Annegray may help to resolve, or at least increase our understanding of, what can appear as contradictions in Jonas's text, which obscures the context of the settlement and, consequently, the dynamics of its foundation. Since 2010, archaeological investigations have been carried out on the site of Annegray with the aim of comparing the archaeological record with the written account. Annegray is situated in the upper valley of the Breuchin, in the foothills of the Vosges Mountains, at an altitude of 400 metres, in an area with a glacial geology unique in France, which has left a multitude of small lakes, hence its name of Plateau des Mille Étangs ('Plateau of the Thousand Lakes'). Far from being a 'desert', the region is rich in archaeological remains, with tangible evidence of different types of habitats, burial grounds, and sanctuaries (Figure 5.1). While the functions of structures which are traditionally known as military forts may be problematic,¹⁶ one must point out that many of these structures are concentrated in the Breuchin Valley, between Luxeuil and Annegray, both of which were Gallo-Roman *castra* according to Jonas.¹⁷

More importantly, however, it is quite probable that the Breuchin Valley constituted an important highway, perhaps along the same course as the modern road (D6). Indeed, the geographical context shows that the Breuchin Valley provided a line of penetration into the interior of the Vosges massif, allowing



¹⁶ One must be extremely cautious in relation to the interpretation of remains and toponyms that are based on nineteenth-century historiographical traditions.

¹⁷ For a presentation of the archaeological map of the Annegray region and landscape, see Marron and Bully, 'Recent Archaeological Work'.

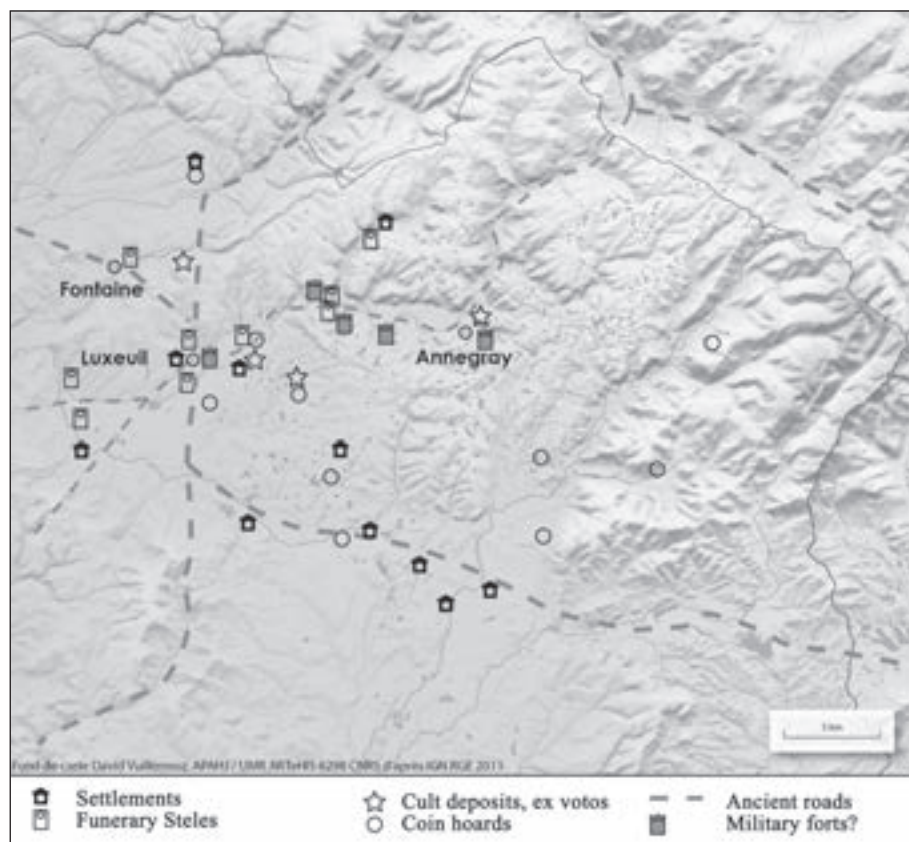


Figure 5.1. Road network and archaeological features around Annegray and Luxeuil.

From Marron, *In His Silvis Silere*, pp. 78, 88, and 89.

for contacts between the Saône Valley to the west and the valley of the Moselle, just a few kilometres to the east of Annegray. Far from being isolated, the site of Annegray is, therefore, located along the access road to a major highway, the Moselle being the main access route to the capital cities of Metz and Trier. This strategic situation is also evident in the High Middle Ages. Faucogney, three kilometres from Annegray, is the location of one of the most important lordships in the north of the county of Burgundy, from the start of the eleventh century onwards. The development of this lordship is clearly linked to its position at the point which controls access to the gap of Mont de Fourche and the valley of the Moselle. Was it already a point of strategic importance in Merovingian times?



Figure 5.2. General view of Annegray from the south. The Romanesque church and the Merovingian sarcophagi are located on the small mound in the foreground. In the background, one can see the Church of Saint-Martin on top of the hill and just below, to the left, the gap leading to the Moselle Valley. The fortified medieval building is located behind the row of trees in the hollow between the Annegray mound and the hill of the Église Saint-Martin, on the right of the photograph. (Com'air, 2013)

The answer to this question may lie in Mont Saint-Martin, the hill which dominates the site of Annegray, just 700 metres north of the ecclesiastical site. Nowadays, a thirteenth-century church occupies the top of the hill. However, a number of discoveries made on the site since the eighteenth century point to the presence of a Gallo-Roman sanctuary on the same site. This has been argued to have been a temple dedicated to Diana, on the evidence of a stele representing the goddess with a crescent moon above her head and a statuette of her as a huntress, both discovered at the site.¹⁸ A number of ex-voto offerings were also discovered in the nave of the church itself, while tiles and pottery (dated to the first and second century AD) found in the cemetery around the church testify to Gallo-Roman occupation of the site, most probably cultic in nature. The early Christianization of the mountain is suggested by the presence

¹⁸ See De Montfaucon, *L'Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, II, 230–31 and illustration.

of a sculpted block, possibly from a Carolingian *antependium* (altar frontal), reused in the wall of the present church. The results of geophysical survey followed by archaeological investigations carried out in summer 2013 have confirmed the presence of an earlier structure in the form of a wall. However, it has not yet been possible to establish either the character or the date of this phase, given the total lack of datable material. Further trenches will have to be opened in the nave of the church to examine this question. A fuller understanding of the occupation of Mont Saint-Martin and its chronology would give us a better knowledge of the landscape in which Columbanus established himself, in addition to the proximity of an essential thoroughfare.

What do we know about the site of Annegray itself? There is very little documentation about the monastery of Annegray in the Middle Ages. It is mentioned in two ninth-century documents: the *Liber Memorialis* of Remiremont Abbey; and the will of Ansegisus, Abbot of Luxeuil from 817 to 823.¹⁹ It is mentioned again in a spurious charter attributed to Charlemagne but written in the twelfth century. The names of priors of Annegray are found in twelfth- and fourteenth-century charters. Again, little is known about the monastic buildings, apart from the Romanesque church, consecrated in 1049,²⁰ which has been partly excavated. It was replaced by a modest chapel after its destruction in 1777. All buildings belonging to the Priory of Annegray were confiscated by the revolutionary government, sold as National Property in 1792, and their stones used as quarry. The first excavations were carried out on the hill-ock of Annegray in 1958 by Gilles Cugnier, which resulted in the discovery of the Romanesque church and, more significantly, a number of Merovingian sarcophagi (Figure 5.2).²¹ As part of our research programme, we have carried out a topographic survey of the ancient remains, but more importantly, we have also conducted an extensive campaign of geophysical prospection, using resistivity, magnetic gradiometry, and ground-penetrating radar.²² The objective of

¹⁹ For an edition of Ansegisus's will, see *Gesta abbatum fontanellensium*, ed. by Loewenfeld, p. 59; see also Laporte, 'Une variété de rouleaux'. On Annegray in the *Liber Memorialis*, see *Liber memorialis von Remiremont*, ed. by Hlawitschka and others, I, 24, II, 48–49; see also Gaillard, *D'une réforme à l'autre*, pp. 41–56.

²⁰ See Cugnier, 'La Voivre, Lieu-dit Annegray'; however, it must be pointed out that, while this date is often mentioned in modern historiography, the medieval evidence in support of it is lacking.

²¹ See Cugnier, *Le Monastère Saint-Jean-Baptiste d'Annegray*; Cugnier, 'La Voivre, Lieu-dit Annegray'.

²² See Bully and others, 'Le Site du monastère d'Annegray'.

this survey was to attempt to localize the monastery and *castrum* of *Annagrates*, as mentioned by Jonas.²³ The prospection, conducted over many hectares, did not confirm the hypothesis of a circular enclosure around the church. On the other hand, we did discover the presence of a large quadrangular structure, situated in the hollow between the Annegray mound and the hill of the Église Saint-Martin and consisting of a double enclosure and moat, measuring around sixty by forty metres. In the moat itself, a wooden structure was found, belonging to a bridge allowing access to the interior platform. However, the results of the dendrochronological and radiocarbon dating, as well as the artefacts found, would suggest a construction date between the end of the twelfth and beginning of the fifteenth century.²⁴ As a result, the most likely interpretation for the structure is that of a moated site, established at the foot of the monastery, or even a fortified grange, which formed part of the monastery itself, rather than structures relating to the early medieval occupation of the site. The question of the exact location and layout of the Merovingian monastery, and the existence of a *castrum*, remains to be established. However, the discovery of Roman tiles and residual Merovingian ceramics within the walls of the medieval fortified house and in the surrounding ditch encouraged us to continue the research.

In August 2013, new trenches were opened on the hillock at Annegray. The results are still being considered. However, we can say that the work has allowed us to confirm the plan of the Romanesque church and to identify a number of buildings related to the medieval monastery. The presence of a carved abacus from the Carolingian period inserted in the wall of the Romanesque church is, apart from the sarcophagi, the first indication pointing to the existence of an earlier church. Furthermore, the latest geophysical prospection has revealed substantial structures located some fifty metres north-west of the Romanesque church. Further research is in progress to ascertain the date and the exact nature of these structures. As a preliminary conclusion, it must be said that, so far, it has not been possible to demonstrate clearly the existence of a *castrum* at Annegray, but the presence of residual Gallo-Roman and Merovingian material suggests occupation in the fifth and sixth centuries in the immediate vicinity. This requires us to re-evaluate the notion of the *desertum* presented by Jonas when considering the landscape in which Annegray was founded. More importantly, we must consider the reasons behind the choice of such a strategic location and what would seem to have been the almost complete abandonment of Annegray at an early stage by Columbanus in favour of Luxeuil. It is quite likely

²³ See above, p. 106 and note 17.

²⁴ For details of this excavation, see Bully, 'Annegray' and Bully and others 'Autour de Luxeuil'.

that Luxeuil was the location intended for Columbanus by King Childebert II, and the abandonment of Annegray would seem to indicate that this site was used as a temporary location for the monastery until the political climate was ripe for assuming control of Luxeuil.²⁵

Luxeuil

The description of Luxeuil upon the arrival of Columbanus by Jonas must also be read with the rhetoric of the desert in mind:

Cumque iam multorum monachorum societate densaretur, coepit cogitare, ut potioris loci in eodem heremo quereretur, quo monasterium construxisset, inuenitque castrum firmissimo olim fuisse munimine cultum, a supradicto loco distantem plus minus octo milibus, quem Luxouium prisca tempora nuncupabant. Ibi aquae calidae cultu eximio constructae habebantur; ibi imaginum lapidearum densitas uicina saltus densabat, quas cultu miserabili ritoque profano uetusta paganorum tempora honorabant, quibusque execrabiles ceremonias litabant; solae ibi ferae ac bestiae, ursorum, bubalorum, luporum multitudo frequentabant. Ibi residens uir egregius monasterium construere coepit, ad cuius famam plebs undique concurrere et se cultui religionis dicare curabant, ita ut plurima monachorum multitudo adunata, uix unius coenobii collegio sistere ualeret. Ibi nobilium liberi undique concurrere nitebantur, ut exspreta faleramenta saeculi, et praesentium pompam facultatum contempnentes, aeterna praemia caperent.²⁶

[As the community of monks was getting too crowded, he started thinking that he should look for a better location in the same wilderness to build a monastery, and he found that there was a fort, formerly protected by very strong fortifications, situated about eight miles from the first abode, and which had been called Luxeuil since olden times. In this place, there were hot baths constructed with remarkable elegance. In this place, the nearby wood was crowded with a multitude of stone carvings. In ancient times, pagans worshipped them through deplorable and unholy rites, and they offered sacrifices to them during accursed ceremonies; it was inhabited only by wild beasts, with a multitude of bears, wild bulls, and wolves. In this place, the excellent man began to build a monastery where people strove to come from all directions on account of his fame, in order to dedicate themselves to the practice of religious life so that the large number of monks could hardly remain assembled as the community of a single monastery. The children of the nobles strove to come there from all directions, despising the spurned trappings of the world and the pomp of present wealth in order to seek eternal rewards.]

²⁵ See Wood, 'Jonas, the Merovingians, and Pope Honorius', pp. 105–14.

²⁶ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, ch. 10, St Gall MS 553, pp. 36–37 (see Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ed. by Krusch, pp. 169–70).

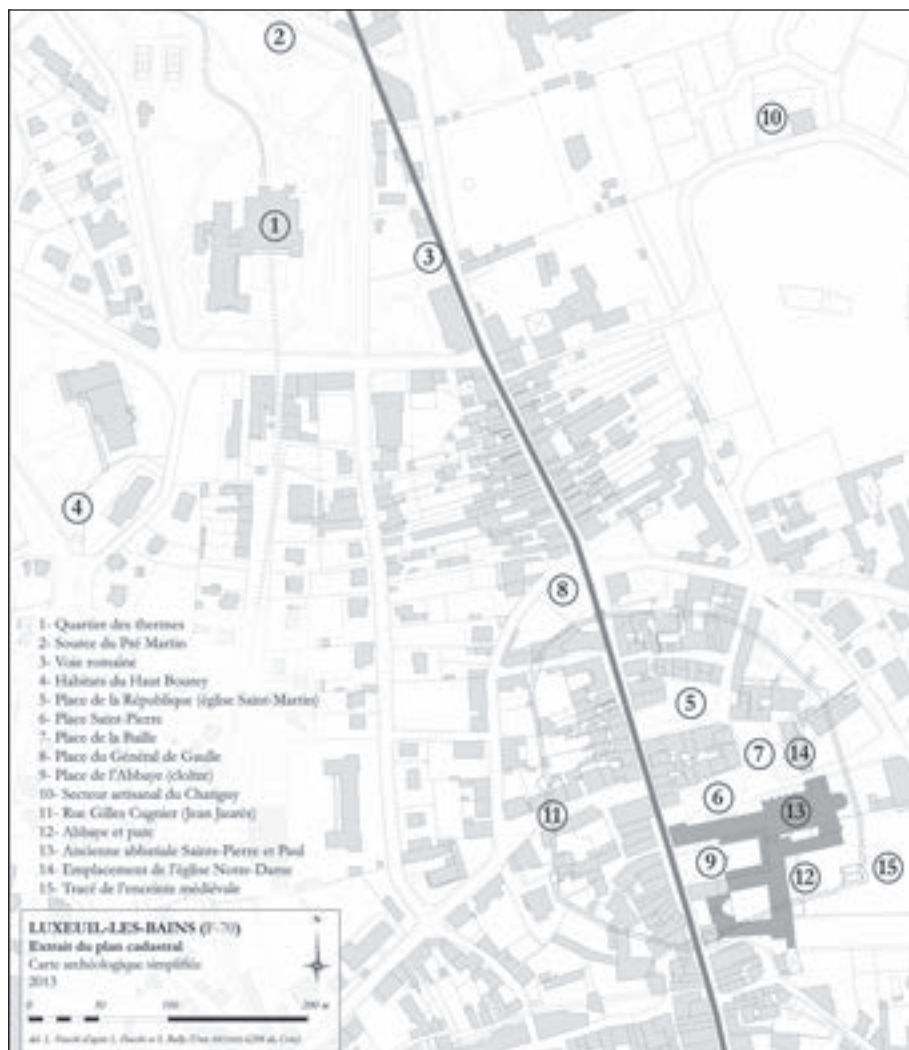


Figure 5.3. Plan of the town of Luxeuil. L. Fiocchi, from Bully and others, 'Les Origines du monastère de Luxeuil', p. 313.

As in the case of Annegray, the words *eremus* and *saltus* are used, and the wolves are also present. The terms *prisca tempora* and *uetusta tempora* also evoke the image of a lost civilization, this time clearly identified as pagan, with the practice of horrid and unholy rites. Jonas does not say that pagans were still living there when Columbanus came, but the mention of pagan practice is intentional and implies a missionary twist to the installation of the Irish in Luxeuil, pos-

sibly anticipating a real interest in missions on the part of Columbanus's successors. Ian Wood, working from textual evidence, has already dismissed the role of Columbanus as a missionary as a myth.²⁷ We shall see that the archaeological evidence confirms that the work of Columbanus did not take place in a wilderness and certainly not amongst a pagan population.

Archaeological research is much more advanced at Luxeuil than at Annegray and allows for a productive comparison to be made with the *Life of Columbanus*. In particular, our research has focused on the context for the foundation of a monastery in a place that was said to have been abandoned since the fourth century AD. Before becoming a major monastery, Luxeuil was a Gallo-Roman town, which developed around natural hot springs, and a curative sanctuary, on the site of the modern baths.²⁸ Archaeological investigation has demonstrated that the current main road preserves the line of a major route, which formed part of the Gallo-Roman road known as the Vosges Route, connecting the capital city of the region, *Vesontio* (Besançon), with the Moselle Valley to the north.

The Gallo-Roman settlement of Luxeuil, therefore, developed not only around a sanctuary, but also at the crossroads of an ancient communication network linking north and south as well as east and west (Figure 5.3). The Gallo-Roman occupation of the town is known not only from both early and more recent excavations, but also from a great number of stray finds. In the old town centre, these consist mainly of Gallo-Roman funeral steles, as well as architectural remains and sarcophagi for which, until now, there was no reliable dating. It was also in the town centre that the only structural remains dating to after the third century were found, which would seem to indicate a contraction of the town in Late Antiquity to form the famous *castrum* mentioned by Jonas.

Since 2005, we have had the opportunity to carry out both test trenches and research excavations in the squares of the ancient town centre, which have allowed us to re-evaluate the extent of the Gallo-Roman settlement as well as the question of the origin of the monastery.²⁹ Important discoveries were made in the Place de la République, where we carried out a large excavation over a period of months, on the site of an early medieval church, known as Saint Martin's. This church is attested in a tenth-century text,³⁰ and on a map made in

²⁷ Wood, *The Missionary Life*, pp. 31–42. See also Wood, 'What Is a Mission?'

²⁸ On Roman Luxeuil, see Bonvalot and others, *Luxovium, retour aux sources*.

²⁹ For a synthesis of the findings of these excavations, see Bully and others, 'Les Origines du monastère de Luxeuil', pp. 311–55.

³⁰ Adso, *Miracula SS. Waldeberti et Eustasii*, ch. 1, ed. by Holder-Egger, p. 1173.



Figure 5.4. Luxeuil, Place de la République, sarcophagi in the funeral enclosure/mausoleum. Photo: M. Dupuis.

1715,³¹ but it was demolished at the end of the eighteenth century and the site levelled to form a town square. The earliest remains revealed by the excavation relate to a Gallo-Roman house which developed through four phases between the middle of the first and the middle of the fourth century AD. The Gallo-Roman remains are particularly well preserved, in spite of the later construction of the church. The floors of the internal living area, the fireplaces located in the walls, the ground level of exterior courtyards, the wells and a hydraulic system, and even the walls of adjoining buildings are all clearly visible. This building, which formed part of a peripheral quarter of the town, was abandoned c. AD 350. In the ruins of these structures a burial ground developed, starting from the middle of the fourth century according to radiocarbon analysis.

Within this burial ground, a building of quadrangular plan was constructed around the year 400, though it is not clear whether it represents a mausoleum or a funerary enclosure. This structure incorporated a number of sarcophagi which included Gallo-Roman funeral steles re-used either as the base or the cover (Figure 5.4). The bones contained in one of the sarcophagi were radiocar-

³¹ Vinot, *Mémoire historique pour servir à l'histoire de Luxeuil*.



Figure 5.5. Luxeuil, Place de la République, general view over the cemetery behind the crypt of Saint-Martin. Photo: R. Le Pennec.

bon dated to the early years of the fifth century.³² The cover of another sarcophagus consisted of a re-used funeral stele placed face downwards, the exterior of which had been carved with a large cross. It may be one of the first indications of an early Christian community in Luxeuil.

This late antique funerary space is contemporary with a building discovered in the nearby Place de la Baille which is situated on the site of a monastic church (Église Notre-Dame) known only from textual references dating from the twelfth century.³³ It consists of a large building, fourteen metres wide by more than twenty metres long, built in *opus africanum*.³⁴ This construction method,³⁵ along with a radiocarbon date, would suggest that it belongs to the second half of the fifth century.³⁶ Unfortunately we do not know its complete plan. However, the devel-

³² Sample Z-4224, Sarcophagus 2.107, person 103: cal AD 320–440 (55.3% probability), cal AD 250–540 (95.4% probability), probability peak around AD 400.

³³ Gérard, *Recherches sur la ville et l'abbaye*, p. 83.

³⁴ Bully and Gaston, 'Luxeuil-les-Bains (Haute-Saône)'.

³⁵ See Hanoune, 'La Construction romaine'.

³⁶ Sample Poz-28163; cal AD 430–90 (38.2% probability), cal AD 510–20 (1.6 % probability), cal AD 530–70 (30.4% probability), cal AD 430–600 (95.4% probability).

opment of a funerary space inside this building and around it from the seventh century onwards would lead us to suggest that it represents an early church structure, contemporary with the nearby burial ground in the Place de la République. Equally, we should highlight the fact that, in this region, construction in *opus africanum* is known exclusively in ecclesiastical contexts, for the most part episcopal.³⁷

Returning to the Place de la République, our excavation also revealed the construction of a large funerary church on the site of the fourth- and fifth-century burial ground. The church dates to the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century,³⁸ that is, just under a century before the arrival of Columbanus and the foundation of the monastery. It contained a large number of sarcophagi, in the choir as well as in the nave. However, most of the simpler burials, with wooden coffins rather than stone sarcophagi, were found outside the church, around the quadrangular apse, and were immediately succeeded by Merovingian sarcophagi (Figure 5.5). These latter are contemporary with the extension of the church eastwards by the addition of a small quadrangular structure, which may be identified as a type of apsidal crypt or mausoleum. This construction can be dated to around the year 600.³⁹ Its interpretation, however, is difficult. We know from the texts and the archaeology that it contained the tomb of Abbot Walbert, who died in 670,⁴⁰ but its construction predates his burial by around seventy years. One hypothesis, proposed by our colleague Michèle Gaillard, is that the crypt was originally destined for the remains of Columbanus, before his death in 615 at Bobbio in Italy.⁴¹ What we do know, however, is that a burial ground *ad sanctos* developed around the apse of the crypt during the seventh century. From a study of the inscriptions on the lids of sarcophagi and from the osteological study of the bones, we can say that this was an area reserved for the interment of monks.

³⁷ As, for example, at the North Cathedral in Geneva (see Bonnet, 'Topographie chrétienne et développement urbain'), or at the *aula* of the bishop's quarter in Tournai (see Bonnet and Bruet, 'Les Fouilles de la cathédrale de Tournai').

³⁸ Radiocarbon dating: sample Poz-35363, cal AD 530–605 (68.2% probability), cal AD 467–82 (1.7% probability), cal AD 534–645 (93.7% probability); see Bully and others, 'Les Origines du monastère de Luxeuil', pp. 343–44 and n. 84.

³⁹ Radiocarbon dating: samples Lyon-7532 (SacA21935) and Lyon-7530 (SacA21933); see Bully and others, 'Les Origines du monastère de Luxeuil', pp. 346–48 and n. 94.

⁴⁰ Adso, *Miracula SS. Waldeberti et Eustasii*, ch. 1, ed. by Holder-Egger, p. 1173. For a detailed description of the archaeological findings, see Bully and others, 'Les Origines du monastère de Luxeuil', pp. 346–50.

⁴¹ Gaillard and Deflou-Leca, 'Sources narratives et archéologie'.

haps the seat of a vicar or archpriest.⁴² Another possibility is that it represents a short-lived bishopric within the confines of the archbishopric of Besançon. It may be that the priest named Winio, mentioned on two occasions by Jonas, may have been linked to this ecclesiastical complex.⁴³ It is important to note that, to date, there is no evidence of Irish influence in the earliest topography of Luxeuil. What we see instead is the pragmatic reuse of existing buildings. This may also be the case with the *atrium* mentioned by Jonas.⁴⁴ The choice of a *castrum*, still occupied, at the intersection of a number of Gallo-Roman roads, for the establishment of a monastery cannot have been accidental, and certainly does not correspond with the search for the 'desert' evoked in hagiography. Instead it should be seen as a political act, underlying the creation of a controlled territory on the fringes of the diocese of Besançon and on the border of the Merovingian kingdoms of Burgundy and Austrasia. Furthermore, Columbanus's installation in a place where a well-organized Christian community was already present invites us to reassess the nature of relations between the great Irish monk and the episcopate that, at the start, may not have been as conflicted as the textual tradition would lead us to believe.

Conclusion

Recent archaeological discoveries at Luxeuil have therefore provided tangible evidence to confirm the doubts expressed by modern scholars concerning the historical narrative provided by Jonas of Bobbio. This evidence also has implications for the traditional view of the work of Columbanus in terms of mission and conversion.⁴⁵ Leaving aside the rhetoric of the desert, it is clear that, in the last decade of the sixth century, Luxeuil was not an abandoned settlement and that it was not inhabited by pagans, but on the contrary, it had con-

⁴² On the concept of the presbyteral group, see Guyon, 'Regards sur la topographie chrétienne'.

⁴³ Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, chs 15 and 17, ed. by Krusch, pp. 177–79, and p. 182. Following Krusch (pp. 39–41), Gérard Moysse also postulated an earlier *parrochia* led by Winio before the foundation of Columbanus's monastery (Moysse, 'Les Origines du monachisme', pp. 85, 458).

⁴⁴ Jonas, *Life of Columbanus*, ch. 20, ed. by Krusch, p. 194.

⁴⁵ While this view, widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is slowly changing (see Larkin, *Saint Columbanus Pilgrim for Christ*), it is still widely held in general literature in religious studies. For recent examples, see Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission*, pp. 76–83; Appold, *The Reformation*, pp. 11–160.

tinuously harboured a Christian population from the fifth century onwards, with no apparent break in occupation. We know from Columbanus himself that he never headed a mission in the currently accepted meaning of the term, namely, an organized campaign of preaching the gospel to pagan populations in order to convert them to Christianity. In 610 he wrote a letter to his monks in Luxeuil in which he admits that the idea had crossed his mind but that, given the reluctance of the natives, he had decided not get involved: 'Mei uoti fuit gentes uisitare, et euangelium eis a nobis praedicari, sed Fe. modo referente eorum teporem pene meum tulit inde animum' ('It was in my wish to visit the heathen and have the Gospel preached to them by us, but when F. just reported their coolness, he quite took my mind from that').⁴⁶ The word *conuersio* is found only once in his letters and homilies, and there it has the precise meaning of changing one's life by becoming a monk: 'quid faciendum est de monachis illis, qui [...] contra uota uenientes primae conuersionis loca relinquunt' ('what is to be done about those monks who [...] against their vows, leave the monasteries of their first profession').⁴⁷ The same meaning is found in two passages in the penitential attributed to him: 'Si quis autem clericus aut diaconus vel alicuius gradus, qui laicus fuit in saeculo cum filiis et filiabus, post conversionem suam iterum suam cognoverit clientelam et filium iterum de ea genuerit, sciat se adulterium perpetrasse' ('But, if any cleric or deacon, or a man in any orders, had sons and daughters when a layman in the world, and after joining the Church, if he sleeps again with his female companion and begets a child by her, let him know that he has committed adultery');⁴⁸ 'Si quis laicus periuraverit, si per cupiditatem hoc fecerit, totas res suas vendat et donet pauperibus et convertatur ex integro ad dominum, et tundatur omni dimisso saeculo et usque ad mortem seruiat deo in monasterio' ('If any layman has perjured himself, if he did it out of greed, let him sell all his property and give it to the poor and let him devote himself entirely to God, receive the tonsure, having renounced the whole world, and let him serve God in a monastery until his death').⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Columbanus, Letter IV, 5, ed. and trans. by Walker, pp. 30–31. The name of Columbanus's contact is not known. In his 1957 edition of the Letters, Walker supplies the name Fedolius. Letter IV existed in a single Bobbio manuscript, now lost. It was printed in 1667 by Fleming in his *Collectanea Sacra* and copied also in the seventeenth century by Metzler (St Gall MS 1346). The readings in these transcriptions are *Fee.* and *Fel.*

⁴⁷ Columbanus, Letter I, 7, ed. and trans. by Walker, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Columbanus, Penitential B, §8, ed. and trans. by Walker, p. 174.

⁴⁹ Columbanus, Penitential B, §20, ed. and trans. by Walker, p. 176.

Columbanus did not preach to pagans, but he certainly preached conversion to a better life of the kind that only monastic asceticism could deliver. His discourse was successful since, besides the testimony of Jonas, we know from other sources that the children of the Frankish elite actually converted and became monks and nuns.⁵⁰ While the rhetoric of Jonas belongs to the situation of his own time, when Luxeuil had started extending its activities into missionary work, the foundation of a monastery at Luxeuil by Columbanus in 593 was the manifestation of a different type of strategy. This foundation could not have happened without the active support — and probably the prompting — of King Childebert II and, possibly, his mother Brunehild.⁵¹ In this respect Luxeuil appears to be an early instance of a territorial strategy that became widespread in the seventh century. The monastic life — with its insistence on obedience, humility, a reasonable diet, and contempt for material goods — was proposed as a better model, not just for clerics, but also for lay people. A society organized along these lines and precepts could live in harmony. The concern for social order expressed in early Irish texts has already been demonstrated elsewhere, and while the heavenly city of Jerusalem could be seen as the ultimate destination for the human race, the practical model on earth was Bethany, ‘The City of Obedience’.⁵² Reforming society through the introduction of a monastic way of life to a wider population was not specific to the circle of Columbanus, as recent articles by Stéphane Gioanni and Anne-Marie Helvétius have shown.⁵³ The confusion about the nature of Columbanus’s mission at Luxeuil is partly due to our misreading of the *Vita Columbani*, and especially to our understanding of the word *religio* in the passage quoted above (pp. 107–08). In an important article on the Merovingian inscriptions published in 1976, Harmut Atsma had already shown that ‘being religious’ had acquired the meaning of being a monk or a nun (*religiosus, religiosa*).⁵⁴ Even

⁵⁰ See Moyse, ‘L’Essaimage colombanien’.

⁵¹ For the likely involvement of Childebert II in the foundation of Luxeuil, see Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 195; Wood, ‘Jonas, the Merovingians, and Pope Honorius’, p. 111; Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space*, pp. 50–51; O’Hara, ‘The *Vita Columbani* in Merovingian Gaul’, pp. 131–32 and pp. 149–52; Gaillard, ‘La Gaule mérovingienne à l’arrivée de saint Colomban’. Against the traditional image of Brunehild as the wicked queen, see now Dumézil, *La Reine Brunehaut*, where her role as patron of monasteries is clearly shown.

⁵² Picard, ‘Christianisation et hiérarchie’.

⁵³ Gioanni, “Être véritablement moine”; Helvétius, ‘Hagiographie et réformes monastiques’.

⁵⁴ Atsma, ‘Die christlichen Inschriften Galliens’, pp. 40–46.

though it is found written in a chapter where the ancient pagan cult in Luxeuil is evoked, the phrase *cultus religionis* does not refer to Christian religion but rather conversion to the monastic way of life. Bringing monastic values and the day-to-day running of a large community of people according to monastic practice must have proved beneficial since no fewer than 320 new monasteries were founded in Gaul in the seventh century, of which 230 were located in the northern half of the country, in the territories more closely controlled by the Merovingian kings.⁵⁵ While Columbanus was not a missionary, it seems more and more likely that he came to Luxeuil with a mission, sponsored by the King of Austrasia, to reorganize a territory and its population according to the salutary principles of monastic life.

⁵⁵ Atsma, 'Les Monastères urbains du nord de la Gaule', p. 168.

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