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THE FIRST MENTION OF ST AUSTELL, CA. 900 AD, IN A VATICAN MANUSCRIPT

In the Vatican there is a Latin manuscript, shelfmark Vatican Reginensis Latinus 191, which contains a collection of texts assembled for the church in Reims in northern France. The manuscript is online, and may be found [here](#).

At some point before the 12th century, the manuscript was given some parchment guard-leaves on either end. These are not blank. They were taken from another volume and turned upside down to avoid distraction. The pages contain part of ps.Seneca, *De Moribus*, followed by the notice of Jerome on Seneca from *De viris illustribus*.

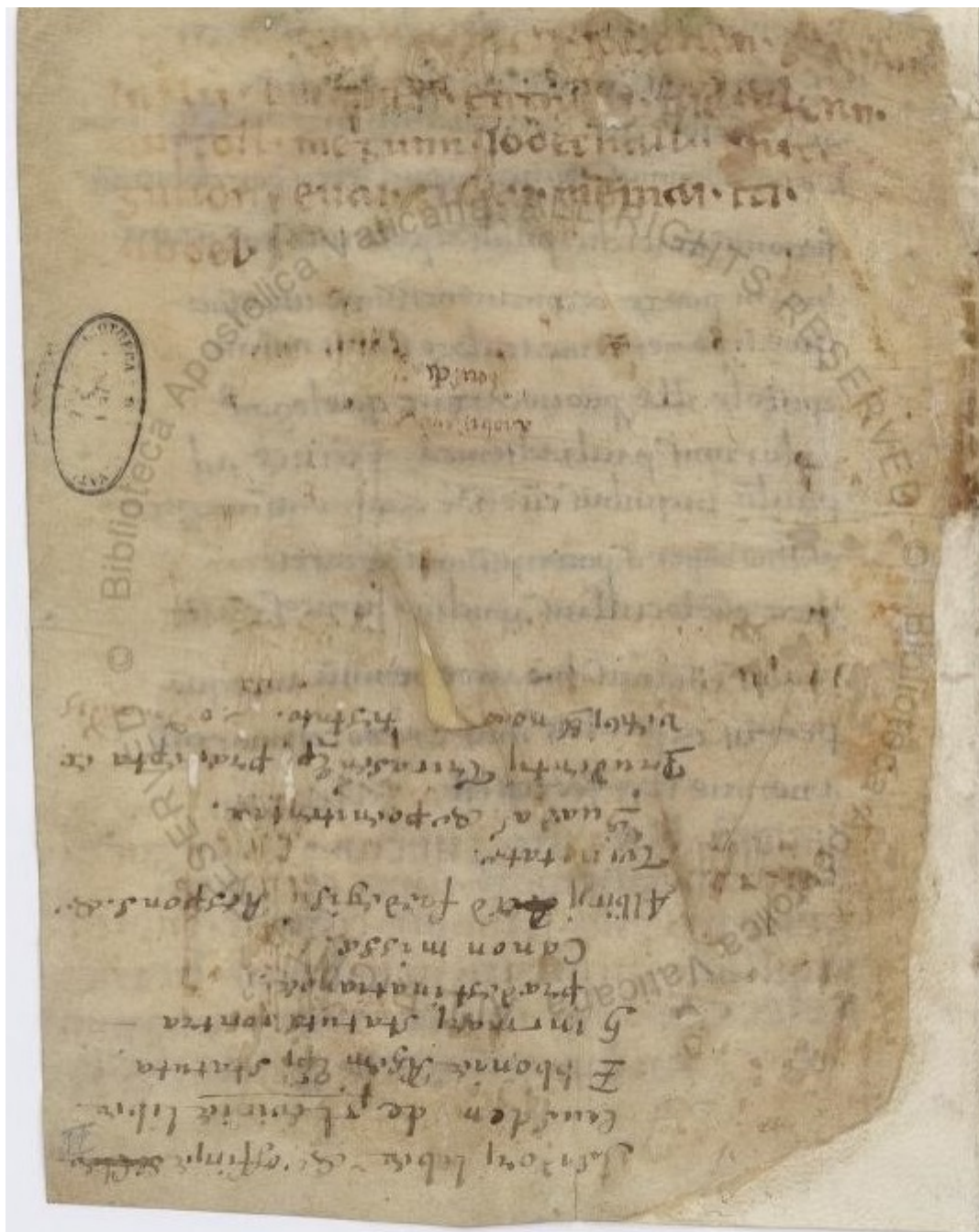
Jerome finishes part way down what is now folio iir. Then on the same line there is a list of 48 names, written in an larger insular book hand, and carrying on over the page.

Here is the first page, turned back the right way:

Diabolus aliquando gloriabatur se inter-
 fectore esse misericordie que dñe.
 nunc socios tue beatitudinis ingemescit; inue-
 nitur. Benmus. semca. apud grecos cordobensis.
 foronis forici dieipulus & patrus. intpant
 lucam poete & continentissime uitae fuit
 que n ponere in catalogo scōrū misime
 epistole ille puouocarent que legunt
 a plurimis pauli ad semcā. & serice ad
 paulū in quibus cū esset & nor omis magister
 et illius tēporis potentissimus auctor se
 dicit esse locullius apud suos amicos cū sit
 paulus xpianus hic ante semmū antequā
 petrus & paulus mar tito coronarent
 a nerone interfectus est; salapian
 senora. banmō. cuncan. ciue. guenb.
 nuaton. guenon. iur. euren.
 fene. pily. nūmon. camg. meler.
 ribillon. m. uican. acholman. betton.
 telec. guon. ondec. m. oem. p. n. o. p. u.
 lotoc. in d. m. p. n. g. u. m. g. u. e. e. n. o. e.

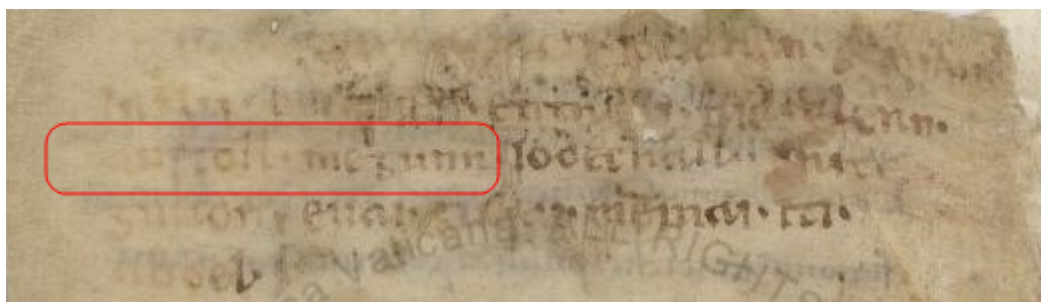
Vatican Reg. Lat. 191, f. iir.

And here is the verso:



Vatican reg. lat. 191, folio ii, verso.

On the verso, at the start of line 2, are two names: Austoll and Megunn.



A list of names is inscrutable, and the reader may well ask what he is looking at.

In a brilliant article in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*,^[1] B. L. Olson and O. J. Padel analyse the list and come out with some fascinating conclusions.

They show that these names are all in Old Cornish. Of the 48, 21 are most certainly the

patron saints of modern Cornish parishes. St Just, for instance, is there. Other names are very obscure, and it is possible that the parish patron saint has simply changed since to one better known.

Even more interestingly, they print a map of Cornwall, showing the location of each church. This shows that the parishes cluster together.

These cannot be coincidences. They conclude from this that this is a list of Cornish parishes, written down for some unknown purpose shortly after 900 AD, either in Cornwall or in Brittany. As such this is testimony to the existence of some sort of parish system at this date, in the Anglo-Saxon period, a century before the Norman conquest.

Austoll is of course St Austell (see [this previous post](#)). This scrap of waste parchment is the earliest mention of the saint; but since this is a list of parish saints, this is also the earliest witness to the church and village of St Austell.

The name "Megunn" is undoubtedly Megwin, i.e. St Mewan, or S. Méén, so important in Brittany. There is still a village of St Mewan near St Austell, and we learn from the medieval life of St Mewan that St Austell was a deacon who was the disciple of St Mewan. The two stand together in the list, as on the ground.

There is almost nothing left of Old Cornish, or so the authors tell us. The history of the land has perished. Cornwall began to be assimilated into English even before the conquest.

So this is a precious peek into a land which became Christian in the Roman or sub-Roman period, but about which nothing is really now known. Thus it is only from archaeology that we know of Byzantine ships visiting north Cornwall during this period, off-loading goods from far away, and doubtless taking on a cargo of tin. What did the sophisticated Greek merchants see, on the hills above the landing, in this rude land? Simple churches dedicated to Celtic saints, it would seem.

1. ^[1]B. Lynette Olson & O. J. Padel, "A tenth-century list of Cornish parochial saints", *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986), 33-72, with plates.↩