I often go to France in the summer, but in 2011 I decided to revisit Brittany where I had not been for many years. Brittany is often said to be like Cornwall. But I don’t think it is, really: the interior is more lush with extensive farmland areas, unlike the Cornish moorlands and granite, and much of the coast does not have north Cornwall’s tall cliffs. Some parts of the coast are low-lying with low cliffs, sand dunes and lots of inlets and headlands. Brittany is justly famous for its prehistoric megalithic monuments (see feature Nov/Dec 20011/121), and I did revisit the Carnac alignments and the sites around Locmarioquer, la Table des Marchand, the Grand Menhir and so on. These are now much better displayed than they were 40 years ago, and though in some ways they are rather less accessible, this does not seem to detract from a visit to them.

With my particular interests in early medieval monuments, however, I was keen to look at such evidence in Brittany. The region’s name is usually said to derive from “Britain”, and be the result of British immigrants crossing the channel in the late and post-Roman period. There seems to me to be a developing thesis that there were in fact two influxes of British people to Brittany. One in the fourth century (and possibly the late third), and another a little later in the fifth and sixth centuries. The first may have been of people from eastern England (Kent, Essex, Suffolk etc), perhaps displaced by incoming Anglo-Saxons and relocated by the Roman authorities to a “safer” area, the well-developed Roman province of Lugdunensis Tertia, in Brittany. This is an idea I first heard at a conference some years ago from David Dumville (currently professor of history and palaeography at the University of Aberdeen), the argument being that people would be unlikely to leave from elsewhere in Britain at this time as there was no problem for them.

The second influx is the one we are more familiar with – the movement of people, and particularly so called “Celtic” saints or holy men, from western Britain and Ireland in the sixth century. This fits well with Roger White’s thesis (see end note), that western Britain remained “Roman” longest, essentially into the sixth and seventh centuries. I like this idea.

So what is there in Brittany that reflects these events? Firstly there are several surviving Roman churches. Locmaria on the outskirts of Quimper has much Roman structure remaining. At Langon a small Roman building, which may have been a temple or part...
of a baths complex, has survived as a small church, formerly, and most unlikely, dedicated to St Venus.

There are a number of places where pre-existing pagan or prehistoric monuments have been made Christian by early converts. Two in particular stand out: the St Duzec menhir (Penvern, Côtes d’Armor) and the menhir called the Croix des Douze Apôtres (Cross of the Twelve Apostles) at Logonna Daoulas. The great standing stone at Duzec has symbols of the passion of Christ carved in 1674 and a cross on top. The Twelve Apostles stone stands at a crossroads; it has the apostles carved beneath a figure of Christ.

Others include the great prehistoric burial chamber of Tumulus St Michel at Carnac with a chapel on top, and the standing stones in the churchyard at Plozévet. At the Chapelle-des-Sept-Saints near Lannion the chapel is built on top of a burial chamber which acts as the crypt under the southern transept; though the present church is 1702–14 it probably stands on the site of an earlier one. The “seven saints” seems to refer to skeletons found in the prehistoric tomb.

At St Trophine and Loctudy, iron age period steles or memorial monuments, characteristic of parts of western Brittany, have been adopted and adapted as Christian monuments. The former site also has the probable remains of a saint’s shrine and there are a number of these around Brittany. Most seem to be housed in separate chapels and buildings near or alongside larger churches – rather like the Welsh capel y bedd, where the saint’s bones lay in a separate above-ground chapel rather than in an elaborate crypt under the east end of the church, a much more Romano-Gaulish tradition (there seem to be very few crypts in Brittany, with rare examples such as Quimperlé and Lanmeur).

The best example of a separate shrine is at Locronan, where adjacent to the church, but attached, is a separate late medieval chapel with the shrine, an elaborate stone monument, formerly with the relics of St Cronan. There are less elaborate shrines and features associated with saints elsewhere. At Landeleau the “saint’s bed” or resting place is a piece of Roman sculpture, and at Besné rock outcrops at the early chapel site are called the “saint’s bed” of St Second.

Early medieval monasteries seem to have existed at St Marthieu, St Melaine (in Rennes) and Locoal, and probably at Locmine and Locronan. But the most important were at Dol, Landevennec and Redon – the most important monastery in eastern Brittany. There were early cathedrals at Dol, Alet, St Brieuc, Quimper, Vannes and St Pol de Leon.
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By far the finest collections of medieval reliquaries are at Landevennec and St Gildas de Rhuys. The former is a fine early monastic site at the landward end of a long narrow coastal inlet (known as a ria). It has been excavated and laid out for visitors and has a very useful museum attached. Here in the ruins of the east end of the later medieval monastic church is the tomb of St Guénolé, and the relics associated with him have now been gathered from churches round about. Especially fine is a silver and gilt bust reliquary of Fragan from the church of St Fregant.

At St Gildas de Rhuys, on a peninsula opposite the most famous prehistoric sites, is a fine Romanesque church with the relics of St Gildas kept in a cupboard in the vestry: a silver and gilt head, limb shrines and objects associated with the saint. There must have been much more. In the museum at Landevennec there is a fine ivory cross from the early monastery at St Matthieu, which had been kept at the church of Milizac.

If these are the most elaborate, other places have sarcophagi like that at St Molvan and the wooden bed shrine of St Gobrien at St Servant sur Oust. There are also Celtic saints’ bells at a number of places. Such items are well-known from early medieval Ireland, Wales and Scotland; there are even a few known in Cornwall and western England. At Stival near Pontivy a later wall-painting shows the saint’s bell being used to cure a person with head problems (or a mental condition). Several of these bells are housed in the museum at Landevennec.

Many of the saints of Brittany are connected with Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, reflecting, I think, the second influx of immigrants referred to above. St Samson, for example, who came from Wales (see Mick’s travels Jul/Aug 2008/10) via Cornwall, established a monastery at Dol where his tomb lies, and there were also literary references to the prominent hill, Mont Dol. Gildas, of course, if it is the same person, is associated with the West Country in the sixth century. He wrote the manuscript De Exidio Britanniae (On the Ruin of Britain) castigating the early medieval leaders of Wales and the West Country.

On the west coast of Brittany, Aber Ildut reminds us of the important Welsh saint at Llanilltud Fawr (now Llantwit Major). The Breton site of Lanildut has a small church with steps from the end of the churchyard down to a cave. At Belz an island, now linked by a causeway, has a church and well dedicated to St Cadog. In the church is a stone structure said to be the bed of Cadog, where pilgrims hoped for a miracle and prayed with their head in a hole in the stonework. St Cadog is St Cadog, the great Welsh saint of Llanfairfach in south Wales.

Evidence for early medieval Brittany is rather more difficult to find than the numerous megaliths, but it is worth straying off the normal tracks to see some chapel, holy well or cross site from this period. Over much of the Breton countryside there are large numbers of chapels and holy wells, even in Cornwall and Wales. The structures that exist today are invariably later medieval or later, but the assumption, as in Britain, is that these are often in origin early medieval sites. There has been little excavation anywhere to demonstrate this. Visiting areas like Brittany, I find, helps with the context and understanding of similar sites in areas of western Britain – Wales, Cornwall and Scotland.

When in France I find Atlas de la France de l’An Mil (Picard 1994) invariably useful to find the main sites. Pierre-Roland Giot’s The British Settlement of Brittany (Tempus 2003, see Books Sep 2003/72) is useful, though poorly referenced and indexed. Roger White’s Britannia Prima: Britain’s Last Roman Province (History Press 2009) is thought-provoking. Good gazetteers can be found in Aubrey Burl’s Megalithic Brittany (Thames & Hudson 1985) and Jeremy Knight’s Roman France (Tempus 2001), which includes later sites.