

CHARLES THOMAS

Antony Charles Thomas

24 April 1928 – 7 April 2016

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1989

by

NANCY EDWARDS

Fellow of the Academy

Charles Thomas was a polymath who made a major contribution to our understanding of the archaeology of late Roman and early medieval western and northern Britain and Ireland. He transformed our understanding of the material and other evidence associated with the evolution of Christianity in western and northern Britain, arguing for the continuity of Christianity from the Roman period, rather than subsequent reintroduction from Gaul. His impact on many different aspects of the archaeology and history of his native Cornwall and Scilly was immense, including a significant contribution to our understanding of post-Roman pottery, particularly imports from the Mediterranean, Gaul and Iberia.

Photo: Thomas family



Charles Thomas

Life

The early years

Charles Thomas¹ was a Cornishman through and through. Born in Camborne, the families of both his father, Donald Woodroffe Thomas, a solicitor, local councillor and Trustee of the Royal Institution of Cornwall,² and his mother Viva Warrington Holman (though born in Australia), had deep Cornish roots primarily associated with mining. His grandfather, Captain Arthur Thomas, was managing director of the hugely successful Dolcoath Mine, which finally closed in 1920, and the family also owned land at Gwithian nearby. Charles was initially educated at Elmhirst School, Camborne, and later at Upcott House School in Oakhampton. It was while he was there that a measles outbreak led to quarantine at his grandfather's house. Charles later recounted how, aged eight, he had discovered his grandfather's library, including a book on Cornish linguistics and local history, and this awakened his interest in the Cornish past.³ Indeed, his grandfather, who was the first chairman of the Royal Institution of Cornwall, Cornwall Excavation Committee, was an important influence and encouraged his early enthusiasm for archaeology, collecting Mesolithic flints with him in the fields around Gwithian during school holidays.⁴ Then, in 1940, Charles was sent to Winchester College. Whilst this strong academic environment provided an excellent education, particularly in Latin, allowing him to discover a talent for languages, he found being away from home difficult – so much so that he ran away, arriving by train in Exeter to be collected by his mother the night of a severe German air-raid on the city. He recounts that, 'obsessed with the 1840 Tithe Apportionment Map', he spent his school holidays cycling round the byways of his native parish trying to record archaeological sites.⁵

¹For a collection of papers celebrating Charles Thomas's life, see A.M. Jones & H. Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer in Archaeology: Reflections on the Work of Charles Thomas* (Oxford, 2018). This includes a full assessment of his contribution to the archaeology of Cornwall by N. Johnson, 'Charles Thomas 1928–2016: the sixty-year adventure of a Cornish polymath', pp. 5–24. These are complemented by N. Johnson with R. Cramp, P. Fowler & O. Padel, 'Obituary: Anthony (*sic*) Charles Thomas', *Cornish Archaeology*, 54 (2015), 261–281. For an obituary focusing on his contribution to the early medieval archaeology of Scotland, see S. Driscoll, 'Obituary: Antony Charles Thomas', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 145 (2015), 13–15.

²Charles Thomas's first book, *Christian Antiquities of Camborne* (St Austell, 1967) is dedicated to his father, p. 6.

³F. Lawson-Jones, 'The Academic Memoirs of Professor Charles Thomas', *The Post Hole*, 42 (Jan. 2015), 16–19 at 16. Further reminiscences and biographical material may be found in C. Thomas, *Gathering the Fragments*, ed. C. Bond (Sheffield, 2012).

⁴Johnson *et al.*, 'Obituary', 262.

⁵C. Thomas, 'How It All Began? A Personal Viewpoint', *Cornish Archaeology*, 50 (2011), 3–5, at 3.

There was an assumption that Charles would, like his father, make a career in law and at 17 he was articled to a solicitor in Truro. However, in 1945 he joined the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and served in northern Ireland and Scotland, awakening his interest in other places with a shared Celtic past, as well as spending two years in Egypt (1947–8), where the richness of the archaeological remains acted as a spur and he also picked up colloquial Arabic.⁶ He was interested in militaria and later, when he appeared in the ground-breaking archaeological television quiz *Animal, Vegetable and Mineral* alongside Sir Mortimer Wheeler FBA, he was able correctly to identify Lord Kitchener's left boot: in 1903 Kitchener had been injured in Egypt leaving him with a limp.⁷

Charles studied Jurisprudence at Corpus Christi College, Oxford (1948–51), eventually emerging with a III. Law did not interest him and instead he was increasingly focused on becoming an archaeologist. His first meeting with C.A. Raleigh Radford FBA in 1949 was a turning point (see below) and he became a supervisor on his excavations at Glastonbury Abbey.⁸ He was also sorting finds at the Wayside Museum at Zennor and joined the West Cornwall Field Club (later the Cornwall Archaeology Society), becoming the editor of its journal in 1952, at the age of twenty-four. In 1949 he also began his own fieldwork by discovering sites on his family's land at Gwithian where, the following year, he directed his first excavation at Godrevy Barrow. Subsequent excavations continued in the dune-covered, coastal landscape of Gwithian with its exceptional archaeological preservation for nineteen years.⁹ However, Charles had also realised that he needed professional archaeological training and, whilst at Oxford, he had come across the books of V. Gordon Childe FBA and afterwards wrote to him.¹⁰ As a result, he went to study under Childe for the Post-graduate Diploma in European Archaeology (1951–3) at the Institute of Archaeology in London. These were seminal years that provided the academic foundation, practical training and experience, together with an archaeological network, that enabled him to launch his career.¹¹

⁶ Johnson *et al.*, 'Obituary', 262; Lawson-Jones, 'Academic Memoirs', pp. 16–17.

⁷ J. Mann, *Take a Girl Like Me* (London, 2012), p. 93; G.H. Cassar, *Kitchener as Proconsul of Egypt, 1911–1914* (Cham, 2016), p. 79.

⁸ C. Thomas, 'C. A. Raleigh Radford 1900–1998', *Medieval Archaeology*, 42 (1998), 104–106, at 105; R. Gilchrist, 'Courtenay Arthur Raleigh Radford 1900–1998', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 12 (2013), 341–358, at 345.

⁹ Thomas, 'How It All Began?', 3; Johnson *et al.*, 'Obituary', 262; C. Thomas, *Gwithian: Ten Years' Work (1949–1958)* (West Cornwall Field Club, 1958), p. 30; J.A. Nowakowski, H.A. Quinnell, J. Sturgess, C. Thomas & C. Thorpe, 'Return to Gwithian: Shifting the Sands of Time', *Cornish Archaeology*, 46 (2007), 13–76, at 19–21; Johnson, 'Charles Thomas', pp. 8–10.

¹⁰ Lawson-Jones, 'Academic Memoirs', 16.

¹¹ For a sense of the Institute in those years, see N. Thomas, 'Reflect, Respect, Rejoice', *Cornish Archaeology*, 46 (2007), 3–12 at 5–7.

On his return to Cornwall, he was employed by the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) as a part-time tutor in archaeology and folk-lore (1954–8). At the same time, his fascination with local history and place names grew and he learnt Cornish under the influence of Robert Morton Nance, who was instrumental in its 20th-century revival as a spoken language. Nance, together with Henry Jenner, also founded *Gorsedh Kernow*, the equivalent of the National Eisteddfod of Wales, and Charles was admitted as a Bard in 1953.¹² In addition, he was a founding member of the pressure group and later Cornish nationalist party, *Mebyon Kernow*, but in the 1970s he became disillusioned and never supported those with separatist or less inclusive views.¹³

Charles's archaeological training and role as a part-time tutor combined to give ample opportunities for fieldwork. In 1953 he joined major excavations directed by his friend Nicolas Thomas on the Bronze Age barrow cemetery at Snail Down, Wiltshire.¹⁴ The following year the excavations at Gwithian expanded with the aid of grants from the Prehistoric Society, the West Cornwall Field Club and the Royal Institution of Cornwall, and he began to investigate a cluster of early medieval sites. These revealed buildings and a variety of craftworking activities with midden material and a rich artefactual assemblage. Excavation was also initiated on a sequence of adjacent Bronze Age sites, including fields and roundhouses, and later nearby at the medieval manor-house at Crane Godrevy.¹⁵ The overall aim of the fieldwork and excavations at Gwithian was hugely ambitious, 'to produce a complete sequence, all within the area of about a square mile, covering ... from the end of the Mesolithic to the late medieval'.¹⁶ This was ground-breaking in terms of the development of landscape archaeology, and Charles was later to acknowledge the impact *The Making of the English Landscape* by W.G. Hoskins FBA, published in 1955, had had on the development of his thinking.¹⁷ The excavations at Gwithian also brought together a group of talented fieldworkers, including Peter Fowler, Bernard Wailes and Vincent Megaw, all of whom went on to forge their own archaeological careers, as well as attracting many volunteers and university students in its role as a teaching excavation. One volunteer in 1955 was the later crime novelist and writer Jessica Mann (daughter of the lawyer F.A. Mann FBA), then a sixth former at St Paul's

¹² B. Murdoch, 'Nance, Robert Morton (1873–1959)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.bangor.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/63389> [accessed 11 December 2023]; Johnson *et al.*, 'Obituary', p. 264.

¹³ He set out his views in C. Thomas, *The Importance of Being Cornish: An Inaugural Lecture delivered in the University of Exeter on 8 March 1973* (Exeter, 1973).

¹⁴ N. Thomas, *Snail Down Wiltshire: The Bronze Age Barrow Cemetery and Related Earthworks, in the Parishes of Collingbourne Ducis and Collingbourne Kingston, Excavations, 1953, 1955 and 1957* (Devizes, 2005), Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society monograph 3.

¹⁵ Thomas, *Gwithian: Ten Years' Work*; Nowakowski *et al.*, 'Return to Gwithian', 13–76.

¹⁶ Thomas, *Gwithian: Ten Years' Work*, p. 32.

¹⁷ Johnson *et al.*, 'Obituary', 263.

Girls' School in London. She and Charles were married in 1959, after she graduated from Cambridge with a degree in Archaeology and Anglo-Saxon.¹⁸

Scotland

By the mid-1950s Charles's interests were beginning to crystalise, with a focus on early medieval archaeology. Although he continued to excavate at Gwithian and on other Cornish sites, he was also broadening his geographical horizons. After identifying post-Roman imported pottery from the Mediterranean and south-west Gaul at Gwithian, in 1955 he began research on imported pottery for a DPhil at Oxford, though he never completed it.¹⁹ Influenced by Radford's excavations at Tintagel in the 1930s and 1955, where large amounts of such imported pottery had been found, his interests in early Christian archaeology were also developing as the site was then regarded as a monastery.²⁰ In 1954 Charles excavated a number of small trenches at the early medieval monastic site of Nendrum in northern Ireland.²¹ This may have led to the invitation, probably at Radford's instigation, to begin excavations on the iconic, early Christian monastic site of Iona in Scotland, after Stuart Piggott FBA, who then held the Abercromby Chair in Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh (succeeding Childe), had apparently turned down the opportunity.²² The excavations, which began in 1956 at the behest of the Iona Community, were funded by the Russell Trust and their aim was to 'recover as much as possible of the material remains of the monastic house founded in A.D. 563 by Columba'.²³ A full survey was conducted and over a hundred small slit trenches dug revealing rich early medieval remains. These were nonetheless difficult to interpret because of the methodology used, which was almost certainly modelled on that of Radford at Glastonbury. Although Charles continued to direct the excavations, there were clearly tensions with the Iona Community and he was only on site in 1956, 1957, 1959 and 1963. He therefore depended on a high calibre team that again included Peter Fowler and his wife Elizabeth, Bernard Wailes, Vincent Megaw and later Richard

¹⁸ Mann, *Take a Girl Like Me*, pp. 79–81. Charles had earlier been briefly and unhappily married to Elizabeth Mary Sims (known as Molly), who married Sir Neville Marriner in 1957.

¹⁹ Nowakowski *et al.*, 'Return to Gwithian', 44–45; Driscoll, 'Obituary', 13–14.

²⁰ R.C. Barrowman, C.E. Batey & C.D. Morris, *Excavations at Tintagel Castle, 1990–1999* (London, 2007), p. 3.

²¹ T. McErlean & N. Crothers, *Harnessing the Tides: The Early Medieval Tide Mills at Nendrum Monastery, Strangford Lough* (Belfast, 2007), p. 332.

²² E. Campbell & A. Maldonado, 'Charles Thomas in North Britain: A Career in the Making', in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 147–153, at pp. 147–150; E. Campbell & A. Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem "at the ends of the earth": Interpreting Charles Thomas's Excavations at Iona Abbey 1956–63', *Antiquaries Journal*, 100 (2020), 33–85, at 41–43.

²³ C. Thomas, 'Iona', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* (1957), 10.

Reece.²⁴ Nonetheless, it was very probably Charles's excavations at Iona, together with his ongoing research on imported pottery, that led in 1957 to his appointment as Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh at the age of 29; he took up the post the following year.²⁵

Charles later described his years at Edinburgh as the happiest in his life.²⁶ During this period he was immensely energetic and, in his research, he was laying the foundations for the extremely productive period that was to follow. There was, initially, only Stuart Piggott and himself to teach archaeology, and he also lived in the flat below him in Great King Street in the New Town. There is no doubt that Piggott was an inspiring leader, and it must have been an incredibly stimulating academic and intellectual environment in which to work.²⁷ Whilst at Edinburgh he also came into contact with the Celtic scholar and brilliant linguist Kenneth Jackson FBA (1909–91), who was clearly influential.²⁸ Charles regarded lively, informed and up-to-date teaching as important and in this and other things he was also greatly influenced by Piggott as both friend and academic mentor. Indeed, it was Piggott who encouraged Charles to embark on his research on the Pictish symbol stones, the subject of memorable fieldtrips with his students.²⁹ At the same time he was conducting excavations on other early medieval Scottish sites, including the Northumbrian monastery and see at Abercorn outside Edinburgh and two sites in Dumfries and Galloway: the hillfort of Trusty's Hill (1960), and, most important, the early medieval cemetery and church on Ardwall Isle (1961–5), where he used open area excavation rather than narrow trenches for the first time. In Ireland he also did a limited survey of the monastic site at Clonmacnoise (1958, 1963). In Cornwall he excavated a chapel on Teän in Scilly (1956) and another at Fenton St Ia, Troon, in his home parish of Camborne (1966), as well as continuing to dig at Gwithian. It is therefore little wonder that Ardwall Isle was the only site he excavated that received full and prompt publication.³⁰ He was elected to the Society of Antiquaries in 1960.

²⁴ Campbell & Maldonado, 'A New Jerusalem', 45–46; 'Charles Thomas in North Britain', 149–150.

²⁵ Driscoll, 'Obituary', 14.

²⁶ Campbell & Maldonado, 'Charles Thomas in North Britain', 147.

²⁷ R. Mercer, 'Stuart Piggott 1910–1996', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97 (1998), 413–442, at 434–435.

²⁸ P. Maume, 'Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (<https://www.dib.ie/biography/jackson-kenneth-hurlstone-a4239> accessed 6 October 2023); C. Thomas, *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. xvi–xvii.

²⁹ Driscoll, 'Obituary', 14. Piggott's influence (as well as that of Anne Ross) is clear in Charles's article, 'The Animal Art of the Scottish Iron Age and its Origins', *Archaeological Journal*, 118 (1961), 14–64, at 60.

³⁰ Campbell & Maldonado, 'Charles Thomas in North Britain', 147–149; C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 29–31; idem, *Christian Antiquities of Camborne*, pp. 74–85; C. Thomas & C. Johns, 'Excavations at Teän, Isles of Scilly, 1956', in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 101–146; C. Thomas, 'The Early Christian Cemetery and Chapel on Ardwall Isle, Kirkcudbright', *Medieval Archaeology*, 11 (1967), 127–188.

By 1967 Charles's growing reputation ensured that he was interviewed for the new Chair of Archaeology at the University of Leicester. He got the job but, as he later admitted, owing to internal divisions, he found it difficult to make the changes he wanted; he also disliked the English Midland landscape.³¹ However, he continued to maintain his links with Cornwall. He published his first book on his native parish, Camborne, in 1967 and was subsequently elected President of the Royal Institution of Cornwall (1970–3). He continued to excavate in the Duchy at the chapel site of Merthyr Uny (1967–8) and until 1969 at Gwithian. In that year he also began two seasons with Peter Fowler on the site of an early Christian cemetery on the island of Lundy in the Bristol Channel.³² It was his continuing and deeply felt commitment to Cornwall that was to bring a new and very significant opportunity when, in 1971, he was appointed as first director of the newly established Institute of Cornish Studies, where he remained until his retirement in 1991.

Return to Cornwall

Charles took up the post in 1972 and bought Lambessow, a Queen Anne house outside Truro, which became the family home for the rest of his life, providing the space for his rapidly growing library and for archaeological and other collections.³³ The Institute of Cornish Studies, inaugurated on 1 January 1971, was at Trevenson House in Pool, near Redruth, and was, unusually, a jointly funded enterprise between the University of Exeter and Cornwall County Council. Charles's career, as Professor of Cornish Studies and Director of the Institute, which did not have undergraduate students, was now focused on research and administration, including the often tricky task of securing funds. In many ways he was taking on a public role and immediately threw himself into a very ambitious plan. The aim of the Institute was 'to promote, co-ordinate, and assist all forms of Cornish studies ... past, present, and future', focused on Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.³⁴ His inaugural lecture at the University of Exeter not only indicates what being Cornish meant to him but also the (now familiar) problems faced by those who lived there: the exodus of young educated people, high unemployment and low wages, dependence on tourism, damage to the environment and the decline of Methodism. He then emphasised the importance of Cornish identity and the role of the Institute in fulfilling a

³¹ C. Thomas, 'Archaeology and the Mind: An unpublished 1968 Inaugural Lecture', *Gathering the Fragments*, pp. 67–86, at pp. 67–8. For some of the problems he faced, see also A. Fox, *Aileen: A Pioneering Archaeologist* (Leominster, 2000), pp. 139–40.

³² Johnson, 'Charles Thomas', p. 7; H. Quinnell, 'Before the Early Christian Cemetery on Lundy', in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 71–81, at pp. 72–76.

³³ P. Marsdon, 'End Note: A Man of Letters', in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 259–262, at p. 259.

³⁴ *Cornish Studies*, 1 (1973), flyleaf.

pressing need for research on every aspect of Cornish studies, including language and literature, place names, music, and natural history, as well as archaeology.³⁵ The progress of the Institute is charted in its journal, *Cornish Studies (Studhyansow Kerhenek)*, established by Charles. From the outset this included a wide range of articles, mainly by Charles and the research staff, who included Oliver Padel working on place names and Myrna Combellack on Cornish music and drama. Research was also published in the form of pamphlets and special reports. A flavour of the Institute in the late 1970s – making clear Charles’s drive as well as his immense knowledge of Cornwall and hands-on approach – is provided by Adam Sharpe, who was employed as a Manpower Services Commission funded researcher on the Cornish Dialect Survey. This set out to record systematically as many words as possible before they were lost (though inadequate funding led to problems in bringing such an ambitious project to publication).³⁶

At the same time, Charles was becoming increasingly involved at a pivotal moment in putting archaeology in Britain on a more professional footing. He was elected President of the Council for British Archaeology (1970–3) and was also one of a small working party instrumental in the formation of RESCUE. Founded in 1971, this campaigning organisation successfully demanded change in the face of spiralling archaeological destruction caused by rapidly increasing urban redevelopment and infrastructure projects, with the consequent need for new legislation, proper funding and professional units to record and excavate.³⁷ This, in turn, led to public appointments, notably as a Commissioner (1983–1997) of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England.

Closer to home, his influence was instrumental in the establishment in 1975 of the Cornwall Committee for Rescue Archaeology, now the Cornwall Archaeology Unit, Cornwall Council, which he chaired until 1988. Here he oversaw the setting up of a Sites and Monuments Record and major surveys of archaeological landscapes on Bodmin Moor and in West Penwith.³⁸ Following a fire in 1983, he also championed new fieldwork at Tintagel, persuading English Heritage to carry out research excavations, and setting up a Tintagel Research Committee to oversee the programme carried out by the Cornwall Archaeology Unit and Glasgow University (1990–9), the first excavations since Radford’s in the 1930s.³⁹

³⁵ Thomas, *Being Cornish*, pp. 13–20.

³⁶ A. Sharpe, ‘Charles Thomas: Linguistic Archaeologist’, in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 251–253.

³⁷ M. Biddle, ‘Foreword’, pp. ix–x; C. Thomas, ‘Archaeology in Britain in 1973’, pp. 3–15; P. Rahtz, ‘The Origins and Development of RESCUE’, pp. 280–285, all in P. Rahtz (ed.), *Rescue Archaeology* (Harmondsworth, 1974).

³⁸ Johnson *et al.*, ‘Obituary’, 270–271; Johnson, ‘Charles Thomas’, pp. 12–14.

³⁹ J.A. Nowakowski & C. Thomas, *Excavations at Tintagel Parish Churchyard Cornwall, Spring 1990: An Interim Report* (Truro, 1990); *Grave News from Tintagel: An Account of a Second Season of*

His role in supporting archaeological societies and their work, especially those in Cornwall, remained important throughout his life. In 1961–1962, he was one of the small group who spearheaded the expansion of the West Cornwall Field Club into the Cornwall Archaeology Society, with Radford as its first President. Charles remained editor of the journal until 1975 and was later President (1995–1998).⁴⁰ He was also present at the first meeting to establish the Society for Medieval Archaeology in April 1957, and was one of the first members whose research was focused on western and northern Britain, rather than England; he was President 1986–1989.⁴¹

Honours followed. Interestingly, he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Irish Academy as early as 1973, reflecting his archaeological research in Celtic-speaking lands, but his election to the British Academy only came in 1989. He was awarded a CBE in 1991 and received several honorary degrees.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Charles held informal evening ‘salons’ at Lambessow for younger members of staff in the Cornwall Archaeology Unit, encouraging debate and discussion, sometimes accompanied by a slide show. He also gave them the opportunity to meet speakers who had come to talk to the Cornwall Archaeology Society. In retirement, he continued to write and publish widely, but some works, notably his Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Rhind lectures on ‘The Origins of Insular Monasticism’ (1998–1999), which had included a return to Egypt to examine early monastic sites associated with the desert fathers, failed to reach publication.⁴² Though he had never had the time or resources to complete post-excavation and write up his excavations, he now took the step of ensuring that his most important projects at Gwithian and Iona were archived and reassessed by others allowing radiocarbon dating and further work to be carried out.⁴³

Charles never embraced modern technology or email, preferring his manual typewriter, letters and the telephone. He maintained a very wide circle of correspondents and continued his support of younger scholars (including myself), in the fields that interested him, sometimes ringing me up to discuss with great enthusiasm a particular point.

Archaeological Excavation at Tintagel Churchyard, Cornwall, 1991 (Truro, 1992); Barrowman *et al.*, *Excavations at Tintagel Castle*, p. xii.

⁴⁰ Thomas, ‘How it all Began?’, 4–5.

⁴¹ D.M. Wilson, ‘The Foundation Years of the Society for Medieval Archaeology’, in R. Gilchrist & A. Reynolds (eds), *Reflections: 50 Years of Medieval Archaeology, 1957–2007*, (Leeds, 2009), pp. 11–21, at pp. 14, 18–19; C. Gerrard, ‘The Society for Medieval Archaeology: The Early Years (1956–62)’, *Reflections*, pp. 22–45, at pp. 26, 34–35. In this context it is telling that the Society for Medieval Archaeology was initially founded in the post-war era ‘to encourage the study of the archaeology of the period of growth of the English nation’, ‘Editorial’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 1 (1957), 1–3, at 2.

⁴² *Deserts in the Ocean*, see N. Johnson, ‘The Complete Bibliography of Charles Anthony (*sic*) Thomas’, in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 263–285, at p. 272.

⁴³ Nowakowski *et al.*, ‘Return to Gwithian’; Campbell & Maldonado, ‘Charles Thomas in North Britain’, p. 150; *idem*, ‘A New Jerusalem’; E. Campbell, ‘Furnishing an Early Medieval Monastery: New Evidence from Iona’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 63:2 (2019), 298–337.

Towards the end of his life, he was still contributing to ongoing research on Mesolithic flint scatters near Gwithian,⁴⁴ and although he did not live to see the most recent excavations at Tintagel, he was very excited at the prospect. He died on 7 April 2016 and is buried in the churchyard at Gwithian. In the epitaph on his grave-stone he is remembered as ‘Cornishman and scholar’.

Charles was a family man and very proud of his four children and grandchildren. He was ebullient and charming, yet shy, and at public gatherings he would often disappear to smoke his pipe rather than engage in lengthy conversations. Nonetheless, he was a great networker and, although he might at first seem formidable, once he got to know people, he could be very generous with his time. He could also expect very high standards in others and could be exacting if these were not met. He had a wicked sense of humour but was always friendly and patient with enquiries. He was also keen to share his knowledge with others and had a deep impact on many of those he met.⁴⁵

Research achievements

Charles Thomas published very widely, particularly on Cornwall.⁴⁶ He was a polymath whose research focused mainly on archaeology, but he also made extensive use of written sources and linguistic evidence, including place names, and was at home with both Latin and the Celtic languages. He would often use this multidisciplinary approach in his analysis of the then often very fragmentary archaeological evidence to construct a wider narrative. Although his archaeological interests extended back into prehistory, his research achievements relate primarily to the late Roman period and early Middle Ages (c. AD 300–1100) and are focused on the archaeology of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the origins and early development of Christianity in Britain and Ireland and inscribed stones and stone sculpture. These themes frequently intertwine.

From the late 1950s Charles was one amongst a group of gifted young archaeologists, including Rosemary Cramp (1929–2023), David Wilson and Martin Biddle (all FBA), who in their various ways were transforming our understanding of the early medieval archaeology of Britain. Indeed, Charles was at the forefront of the major breakthroughs made in what was then frequently termed ‘Dark Age Celtic archaeology’, alongside Leslie Alcock (1925–2006) and, in the West Country, Philip Rahtz (1921–2011), both of

⁴⁴ A.M. Jones, ‘To the North Cliffs!’, in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 25–42, at pp. 25–26, 30.

⁴⁵ See, for example, accounts of visits to Lambessow in A. Moffat, *Islands of the Evening: Journeys to the Edge of the World* (Edinburgh, 2020), pp. 20–22, and F. Lawson-Jones, ‘From Gwithian to York: a short saga’, in Jones & Quinnell (eds), *An Intellectual Adventurer*, pp. 255–257.

⁴⁶ Johnson, ‘The Complete Bibliography’. It amounts to over 800 items.

whose work was more focused on excavation. These related to our understanding of imported pottery, the elite settlement of hillforts in the post-Roman centuries and Christian archaeology.⁴⁷ Early medieval ‘Celtic archaeology’ and the discoveries associated with it came to the fore in the late 1960s and early 1970s, fuelled in the popular imagination by its romantic association with King Arthur, an association with which Charles was rightly very sceptical.⁴⁸ Earlier, such associations had also been instrumental in the approach adopted by C.A. Raleigh Radford who had done much to shape the subject since the 1930s.⁴⁹ Radford was undoubtedly Charles’s most important academic mentor,⁵⁰ and when Charles returned to live in Cornwall in 1972, he became a regular visitor to Lambessow from his home in Uffculme, near Collumpton in Devon. In his obituary of Radford in *Medieval Archaeology* Charles wrote, ‘From our earliest meeting in 1949, I came progressively under his influence and I suppose knew him, and served with and under him, all my employed life’.⁵¹ What Charles actually did was to turn some of Radford’s most important theories concerning both the origins of Christianity in Britain and Tintagel completely on their heads. This was achieved through a far more wide-ranging and critical examination of the available evidence, and especially the archaeological data, which was increasing rapidly as a result of the surge in excavations on early medieval sites.

Early research: early medieval pottery and chronology

Much of Charles’s early research stemmed naturally from his excavations at Gwithian where he uncovered a wealth of evidence for early medieval settlement and craftworking. In the days before radiocarbon dating (and its subsequent refinement making it more reliable for early medieval archaeology), archaeologists were dependent on a combination of artefactual dating and stratigraphy, where possible related to the sparse and sometimes unreliable written record. In western and northern Britain and Ireland early medieval pottery and coins – mainstays for dating in the Roman period and later Middle Ages – were largely lacking. At Gwithian, however, Charles found a considerable amount of both imported and indigenous pottery and began to set their study on a sounder

⁴⁷ W. Davies, ‘A Historian’s View of Celtic Archaeology’, in D.A. Hinton (ed.), *25 Years of Medieval Archaeology* (Sheffield, 1983), pp. 67–73, at p. 69. Charles’s popular book, *Celtic Britain* (London), was published by Thames and Hudson in 1986.

⁴⁸ C. Thomas, ‘Are These the Walls of Camelot?’, *Antiquity*, 49 (1969), 27–30.

⁴⁹ Gilchrist, ‘Courtenay Arthur Raleigh Radford’, 348–50, 355–356. See also L. Alcock, *Arthur’s Britain: History and Archaeology AD 367–634* (London, 1971); idem, ‘By South Cadbury, is that Camelot...’: *The Excavation of Cadbury Castle 1966–1970* (London, 1972).

⁵⁰ Gilchrist, ‘Courtenay Arthur Raleigh Radford’, 345–346.

⁵¹ C. Thomas, ‘C. A. Raleigh Radford 1900–1998’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 42 (1998), 104–106, at 105.

footing.⁵² Radford had published a preliminary article on imported wares – principally red-slip bowls, some with stamped crosses on the base, amphorae and blue-grey mortaria – which he classified as A, B and D ware, found on his excavations at Tintagel.⁵³ Charles built on this classification, adding a further important type, E ware, found at Gwithian but not at Tintagel. He also provided a hand-list with distribution maps of sites where each type of imported pottery had been found in Britain and Ireland. Crucially, aided by his own work in Scotland and Ireland, this was now based on having handled almost all the pottery concerned, though for parallels he also drew on the research of his friend Bernard Wailes, who had seen collections on the Continent. Charles correctly identified the eastern Mediterranean as a source for most A and B wares and was broadly correct in his preliminary dating of them to the late 5th and 6th centuries. He also surmised that E ware was later than A and B, based on its stratigraphical occurrence at Gwithian, though his then view on the provenance of both D and E wares was misleading;⁵⁴ he later realised that they both came from south-west Gaul. Nevertheless, this article set the parameters for the study of such imported pottery in western and northern Britain and Ireland, research continued by Charles and others since.⁵⁵ Indeed, the numbers of sites with imports have steadily increased allowing the identification of post-Roman, mainly elite, settlements and the lifestyle of feasting associated with them, as well as recognition of a small number of beaching sites and the significance of trade routes through the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic seaways. The terminology has, however, changed as a result of identifying the sources of the pottery in the eastern Mediterranean, north Africa, south-west France and Iberia.⁵⁶

In 1968 Charles published his research on the local early medieval pottery found at Gwithian and other sites in Cornwall in Stuart Piggott's *Festschrift*, acknowledging his

⁵² Nowakowski et al. 'Return to Gwithian', 44–47.

⁵³ C.A.R. Radford, 'Imported Pottery found at Tintagel, Cornwall', in D.B. Harden (ed.), *Dark Age Britain: Studies presented to E. T. Leeds* (London, 1956), pp. 59–70.

⁵⁴ C. Thomas, 'Imported Pottery in Dark-Age Western Britain', *Medieval Archaeology*, 3 (1959), 89–111.

⁵⁵ Charles's most important subsequent publications on imported pottery are: D. Peacock & C. Thomas, 'Class E Imported Post-Roman Pottery: A Suggested Origin', *Cornish Archaeology*, 6 (1967), 35–46; C. Thomas, 'Imported Late Roman Mediterranean Pottery in Ireland and Western Britain', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 76C (1976), 245–253; idem, *A Provisional List of Imported Pottery in Post-Roman Western Britain and Ireland* (Redruth, 1981). For subsequent research, see E. Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400–800* (York, 2007); M. Duggan, *Links to Late Antiquity: Ceramic Exchange and Contacts on the Atlantic Seaboard in the 5th to 7th Centuries AD* (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports, Brit. ser. 639, 2018).

⁵⁶ Ai = Phocaean Red Slipware = Late Roman C; Aii = African Red Slipware (ARS-D); B ware = Late Roman Amphorae (LRA); D ware = Dérivées sigillées paléochrétiennes, Atlantic Group (DSPA). E ware remains the same.

debt to his friend ‘who has never ceased to stress the inherent value of this particular form of evidence’ – pottery.⁵⁷ Charles produced a pioneering typological study of this simple, coil-built, poorly fired, domestic pottery, much of which had distinctive grass-marking on the base. He also built a chronology largely anchored to the early medieval stratigraphy at Gwithian where it had been found in the same layers as imported pottery, though he also drew on evidence from other Cornish sites. Based on his knowledge of similar grass-marked pottery found in north-east Ireland known as souterrain ware, he suggested that the Cornish grass-marked pottery was evidence for Irish immigrants who had arrived there in the 6th century, bringing the technique with them. This is no longer accepted and over time the typology and chronology of Cornish grass-marked pottery has been revised.⁵⁸ Nonetheless this study helped to ignite Charles’s long-term, multidisciplinary research on Irish settlement in post-Roman Britain, first explored in articles from around this time,⁵⁹ together with the Irish contribution to the development of the Church in Britain and its impact on wider Christian contacts around and across the Irish Sea.

The early Christian archaeology of Britain and Ireland

In the most important strand of Charles’s research he succeeded in identifying the various forms of material evidence, such as carved stones, and the types of archaeological site, including monasteries and cemeteries, that might be used to reconstruct the stories that lay behind the conversion of Britain and Ireland and the growth of the Church. These could be used alongside the written sources, including hagiography, and linguistic evidence, such as place names. His research was informed by his excavations on a series of sites ranging from the major monasteries of Iona and Nendrum to smaller Christian sites, such as Ardwall Isle, Teān and Lundy, as well as the excavations by others, such as those at Whithorn by Radford, and at St Ninian’s Isle, Shetland, where a Pictish silver hoard had been found in 1958.⁶⁰ This led him increasingly to question the prevailing view advanced by Radford and others, based primarily on the study of Latin inscribed memorial stones, that in Britain Christianity had died out with the end of Roman control and

⁵⁷ C. Thomas, ‘Grass-marked Pottery in Cornwall’, in J.M. Coles & D.D.A. Simpson (eds), *Studies in Ancient Europe* (Leicester, 1968), pp. 311–331, at p. 311.

⁵⁸ Nowakowski *et al.*, ‘Return to Gwithian’, 45–47; P. Herring, A. Preston-Jones, C. Thorpe & I. Wood, ‘Early Medieval Cornwall’, *Cornish Archaeology*, 50 (2011), 263–286, at 276–282.

⁵⁹ See broader discussions in Thomas, ‘Ardwall Isle’, 177–182; idem, ‘The Irish Settlements in Post-Roman Western Britain: A Survey of the Evidence’, *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, new series 6 (1972), 251–274; idem, ‘Irish Colonists in South-West Britain’, *World Archaeology*, 5:1 (1973), 5–12.

⁶⁰ A. Small, C. Thomas & D.M. Wilson, *St. Ninian’s Isle and its Treasure* (London, 1973), 2 vols.

been reintroduced into western and northern Britain from southern Gaul towards the end of the 5th century.⁶¹

Charles's ideas gradually crystalised in his publications from the later 1960s onwards. In his first book, *Christian Antiquities of Camborne* (1967), he used his native parish as a case-study, examining the cult of the patron saint, Meriasek, the church and its outlying chapels, including St Ia where he had excavated, and other evidence such as early medieval sculpture and holy wells. However, whilst acknowledging the impact of early Christian contacts with the Mediterranean, Iberia and Gaul, he also suggested that west Cornwall might be an area where there was a 'degree of survival [of Christianity] from Roman times' as well as a later influx of Irish influence.⁶² He then discussed the wider evidence for early Christianity in Cornwall, including Latin-inscribed memorial stones, *lan* place names and cemeteries, and related these to the chronological development of a hierarchy of church sites.

He then turned his attention to north Britain. In his report on his excavations at Ardwall Isle, he charted the development of the site beginning with a cemetery and special grave, followed by the construction of a small wooden chapel with further burials and cross-carved stones which was eventually replaced by a stone-walled chapel. He suggested that the first two phases, which demonstrated parallels particularly with sites in south-west Ireland, indicated the impact of Irish eremitic monastic contacts on a sub-Roman diocesan Church in Galloway, with the third phase pointing to influence arising from the establishment of a Northumbrian see at Whithorn in the time of Bede.⁶³ At the same time, he was also examining sub-Roman Christianity more widely in southern Scotland. He suggested that it was based on a diocesan Church with Roman roots based around Carlisle which 'may have continued unbroken through the fifth and sixth [centuries]' and, on the evidence of Latin-inscribed memorial stones, spread northwards.⁶⁴

An invitation to give the Hunter-Marshall Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1968 allowed Charles to bring his ideas together and to present them to a much wider audience. The resulting book, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (1971), was based on extensive fieldwork in western and northern Britain and Ireland and is in fact geographically much broader than the title might suggest. Much of the archaeology

⁶¹ C.A.R. Radford, 'The Early Mediaeval Period', in RCAHMW, *Anglesey* (London, 1937), pp. xci–cii, at p. xciv; idem, 'Christian Origins in Britain', *Medieval Archaeology*, 15 (1971), 1–12, at 9. See also, V.E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950), pp. 1, 55; N. Edwards, 'Perspectives on Conversion in Wales', in R. Flechner & M. Ni Mhaonaigh (eds), *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World: Converting the Isles I* (Turnhout, 2016), pp. 93–107, at pp. 98–99.

⁶² Thomas, *Christian Antiquities of Camborne*, p. 41.

⁶³ Thomas, 'Ardwall Isle', 77.

⁶⁴ C. Thomas, 'The Evidence from North Britain', in M.W. Barley & R.P.C. Hanson (eds), *Christianity in Britain, 300–700* (Leicester, 1968), pp. 93–121, at p. 111.

discussed had received comparatively little previous attention and many of the ideas presented were highly original, and though controversial at the time, subsequently became very influential. One reviewer also commented on Charles's distinctive writing style, that was both 'lucid and objective', yet 'personal and endearing'.⁶⁵ In this book Charles explored the archaeological and other evidence for Christianity from the late Roman period until around 800, considering various forms of site, their associated features and chronology. In a pioneering discussion of burial practices, he suggested that in the countryside there was an element of continuity that stretched back into the prehistoric past and proposed that what he termed 'undeveloped cemeteries' without church buildings were 'the primary field-monuments of insular Christianity'.⁶⁶ By the 7th century, with the addition of wooden, and later stone, chapels, as at Ardwall Isle, and other features such as shrines, these sites might be termed 'developed cemeteries' and ultimately some became the sites of parish churches still used today. He went on to discuss commemoration of the dead as seen in the evolution of carved stone monuments, as well as the cult of primary and secondary relics revealed in various forms of special grave and types of shrine. Overall, he emphasised the likelihood of continuity of Christianity from Roman roots, the significance of Mediterranean and Continental influence indicated, for example, by imported pottery, and the impact of Irish eremitic monasticism in northern and western Britain. What he succeeded in doing was setting many of the foundations for future research.

In *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*, Charles had noted that 'we possess hardly any archaeology of the church in Britain in ... the late Roman and sub-Roman period'.⁶⁷ Nevertheless this was the theme he now chose to pursue, alongside written and linguistic evidence, in *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, published ten years later. This book again had its roots in a lecture series, this time given at the invitation of the Dean and Chapter of Truro Cathedral, and the book was dedicated to Raleigh Radford. At the time, archaeological evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain was steadily increasing. Therefore, after discussion of the use and survival of Latin and the scanty and problematic written sources, Charles could now give a detailed analysis, weighted according to value with accompanying distribution maps, of the material evidence mixed with other sources. He examined Roman period artefacts with Christian symbols and inscriptions and addressed the continuing difficulty of identifying contemporary churches and Christian cemeteries, as well as the nature of other Christian buildings and structures, including those associated with villas such as Lullingstone, and

⁶⁵ P. Rahtz, 'Review of C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*, and *Britain and Ireland in Early Christian Times*, *History*, 58 (1973), 75–76. Charles wrote that he was specifically addressing 'the interested amateur', Thomas, *Early Christian Archaeology*, p. vii.

⁶⁶ Thomas, *Early Christian Archaeology*, p. 50.

⁶⁷ Thomas, *Early Christian Archaeology*, p. 47.

lead tanks, argued to have been used for baptism. In the second part he turned to the 5th-century British Church and the nature of contacts with Gaul, evidenced by imported pottery and the Christian formulae on the inscribed memorial stones, before considering the role of St Ninian in the spread of Christianity in Scotland and the origins of Christianity in Ireland, including St Patrick. Charles's central argument was that 'the true division in the story of Insular Christianity ... comes not around AD 410, but with the opening of a new phase of full monasticism centred about a hundred years later I have no doubts myself, and have not had for years, that continuity from Roman Britain into the sub-Roman 5th century demonstrably took place in many ways and was not confined to Christianity.'⁶⁸ Even so, prior to around 500, he indicated that Christianity was still a minority religion, and that what evidence there was, was focused mainly in northern and western Britain, and not further south as in the Roman period.⁶⁹ Overall the book was a *tour de force* and the thesis underpinning it has largely stood the test of time. Indeed, one reviewer described it as 'a tremendous book, perhaps even a great one'.⁷⁰

Scilly and Tintagel

Islands bore a fascination for Charles and figure prominently in his archaeological work. It is, therefore, not surprising that the first book arising from his return to Cornwall was on Scilly, islands he had known since early childhood, and where in 1956, on Teän, he had excavated a long sequence of activity. It was during these excavations that he and Peter Fowler had become interested in the submerged landscape of Scilly after noticing field-walls, only visible at low tide, on the beach.⁷¹ *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape: Archaeology and History of the Isles of Scilly* (1985) was the result of this longstanding interest. This book was made possible by a British Academy Research Grant (1976–1977) to complete collection of Scilly place names; the compilation of a Sites and Monuments Record for the islands by Jeanette Ratcliffe and Carl Thorpe, funded by an Institute of Cornish Studies Manpower Services project; and Charles's involvement in the Isles of Scilly Environmental Trust, backed up by his extensive fieldwork and the study of a plethora of antiquarian sources.⁷² The use of changing place names with other evidence to reconstruct the chronology of the drowning of an island landscape which created the present archipelago was highly original. He argued that Scilly was a single

⁶⁸ C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), p. 12.

⁶⁹ Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, p. 354.

⁷⁰ R. Morris, Review of C. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, *Medieval Archaeology*, 27 (1983), 230–232, at 232.

⁷¹ Thomas & Johns, 'Excavations on Teän', p. 103.

⁷² C. Thomas, *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape: Archaeology and History of the Isles of Scilly* (London, 1985), p. 14; Johnson, 'Charles Thomas', pp. 11–12.

island, at least until the end of the Roman period and still existed at low tide until the 11th century AD, though this view has been moderated by more recent scientific research.⁷³ Nevertheless, Charles's overall approach was groundbreaking and prescient in many ways with its foci on environmental concerns and the construction of a multi-disciplinary, evolutionary, island biography over a long time-sequence, together with the story of Christianity on Scilly. At the end he considered the impact of Alfred Lord Tennyson's Arthurian poetry on Cornwall, in some ways a prologue to his next project on Tintagel.⁷⁴

Tintagel, Arthur and Archaeology, published in 1993 in the popular Batsford English Heritage series, succeeded in debunking the many myths and legends that had grown up around this dramatic promontory on the north Cornish coast. Taking a broadly cultural biographical approach, he eloquently demonstrated how the Arthurian romance of the site, dating back to Geoffrey of Monmouth, and subsequent reinventions, Arthurian and other, were very much products of their times. In the case of Tintagel, Radford, who carried out the first serious excavations in the 1930s, had rejected such Arthurian associations under the influence of Henry Jenner. Instead, following the discovery of Mediterranean pottery, including sherds stamped with crosses, he interpreted the clusters of rectangular buildings as the cells of an early Celtic monastery. This view was still held by Charles and others into the 1970s, but shortly afterwards cracks in the consensus were beginning to appear, spurred on by excavations on post-Roman hillforts interpreted as the strongholds of a secular elite.⁷⁵ In his book, Charles went on to discuss more recent research at Tintagel, including a reappraisal of the imported pottery (the large volume of which did not suggest a group of ascetic monks), site survey and excavations reassessing Radford's work. There were also excavations at St Matriana's Church nearby, where a post-Roman cist-grave cemetery was revealed.⁷⁶ Together, this allowed him finally to dispose of the Celtic monastery model. Instead, he argued that Tintagel was a post-Roman, seasonally occupied, secular stronghold with evidence of conspicuous consumption, a likely royal site attracting exotic traders seeking tin in return, with a place of burial close by.⁷⁷ This book provided the foundations for future research and

⁷³ Thomas, *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape*, pp. 33–34. For recent research see D.J. Charman *et al.*, *The Lyonesse Project: A Study of the Historic Coastal and Marine Environment of the Isles of Scilly* (Truro, 2016); R. Barnett *et al.*, 'Nonlinear Landscape and Cultural Responses to Sea-Level Rise', *Science Advances*, 6:45 (6 November 2020), 1–10, at 2.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape*, pp. 264–94.

⁷⁵ Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*, pp. 25–7; I. Burrow, 'Tintagel – Some Problems', *Scottish Archaeological Forum*, 5 (1973), 99–103.

⁷⁶ Nowakowski & Thomas, *Excavations at Tintagel Parish Churchyard*; *idem*, *Grave News from Tintagel*.

⁷⁷ C. Thomas, *Tintagel, Arthur and Archaeology* (London, 1993), pp. 82–99.

excavation on the site. During excavations in 1998, a slate was found with graffiti names on it, including ARTOGNOV. This was hailed in the media as direct evidence of King Arthur, but roundly rejected by Charles on linguistic grounds.⁷⁸

Early medieval carved stones

Charles demonstrated a keen interest in early medieval carved stones throughout his life. Indeed, his earliest article on the early Middle Ages discussed the 5th-century, Latin inscribed, Christian memorial stone from Hayle, near Gwithian.⁷⁹ His report on Ardwall Isle and *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* also clearly demonstrated how carved stones could be used as direct evidence for the development of Christianity. Nevertheless, some of Charles's most significant research whilst he was in Edinburgh in the 1960s was on Pictish symbol stones. In 1953 Radford had published an article on the Pictish symbols carved on a rock at the hillfort of Trusty's Hill, a site well outside the normal distribution of such monuments in northern and eastern Scotland.⁸⁰ Charles excavated on the site in 1960 and, like Radford, interpreted the symbols as commemorating a Pictish leader, though he dated them somewhat earlier.⁸¹ At the same time he was investigating the origins and meaning of the Pictish symbols more widely. He argued, against the prevailing view at the time, which dated their origins to the 7th century, that these were a manifestation of long-standing Late Iron Age La Tène influences, enriched by later contacts across the Roman frontier, which had been maintained through use in the form of tattoos. The earliest Pictish symbol stones could therefore date to the 4th or 5th centuries AD and should be seen as indicators of both social and pre-Christian identities.⁸² He went on to suggest, since many Pictish stones were found in burial contexts, that in the absence of writing, the symbols could be used to convey messages commemorating the dead, including kings and other leaders.⁸³ These two articles were pivotal in providing a foundation for future debate, though the functions and meanings of the

⁷⁸ C. Thomas, 'Arthur? What Arthur?!', *Meyn Mamvro*, 38 (1999), 8–9; 'Stone: The Inscribed Slate from the Site C Building', in Barrowman *et al.*, *Excavations at Tintagel Castle*, pp. 191–200. I well remember him producing the slate for discussion whilst on a visit to Rosemary Cramp in Durham.

⁷⁹ C. Thomas, 'The Carnsew Inscription', *Old Cornwall*, 4:3 (Summer 1953), 125–130.

⁸⁰ C.A.R. Radford, 'The Pictish Symbols at Trusty's Hill, Kirkcudbrightshire', *Antiquity*, 27 (1953), 237–239.

⁸¹ C. Thomas, 'Excavations at Trusty's Hill, Anwoth, Kirkcudbrightshire, 1960', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 38 (1961), 58–70. On the re-excavation of Charles's trenches on Trusty's Hill, dating of the site, and a reassessment of the Pictish symbols and their date, see R. Toolis & C. Bowles, *The Lost Dark Age Kingdom of Rheged: The Discovery of a Royal Stronghold at Trusty's Hill, Galloway* (Oxford and Philadelphia, 2017).

⁸² Thomas, 'Animal Art of the Scottish Iron Age'.

⁸³ C. Thomas, 'The Interpretation of the Pictish Symbols', *Archaeological Journal*, 120 (1963), 31–97.

symbols remain enigmatic. Charles's views on dating are now accepted as broadly correct, as is their relationship to commemoration, identity and belief, together with their part in a broader experimental trend in expressing cultural identity through literacy stemming from contact with the Roman world.⁸⁴

In the early 1990s Charles used an invitation to give the Dalrymple Lectures at the University of Glasgow to return to the subject of ogham and Latin inscribed memorial stones and Irish settlement in south-west Britain in the post-Roman period. The resulting book provided a typology for these monuments and, with other evidence, traced the journey of elite Irish immigrants to the northern part of Pembrokeshire (Demetia), and from there to Brycheiniog and parts of Devon and Cornwall (Dumnonia).⁸⁵ However, some of his ideas were highly speculative and his use of the difficult written sources, including origin tales, genealogies and hagiography, which often only survive in late documents, was regarded as controversial.⁸⁶ He went on to explore the possibility of underlying messages in Insular inscriptions revealed by numerical patterns, but unfortunately these were shown to be imaginary.⁸⁷

Overall, Charles Thomas made an enormous contribution to our understanding of early medieval western and northern Britain, and his multidisciplinary approach was essential to this, as it was to his wider research on Cornwall and Scilly. He made a particular contribution to the latter in his capacity as Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies and his roles in other organisations, and he was instrumental in the establishment of significant programmes of archaeological and other data collection in the region that enriched his own research. Though they also appealed to the specialist, his books and much of his other writing also had the wider public firmly in mind.⁸⁸ They are full of ideas but also seek to tell a story. He was also an excellent public speaker who could hold an audience and his enthusiasm always shone through.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ G. Noble, M. Goldberg & D. Hamilton, 'The Development of the Pictish Symbol System: Inscribing Identity beyond the Edges of the Roman Empire', *Antiquity*, 92 (2018), 1329–1348.

⁸⁵ C. Thomas, *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain* (Cardiff, 1994).

⁸⁶ See, for example, A. Lane, 'Review of C. Thomas, *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak?*', *Medieval Archaeology*, 40 (1996), 327–329.

⁸⁷ C. Thomas, *Christian Celts: Messages and Images* (Stroud, 1998); H. McKee & J. McKee, 'Counter Arguments and Numerical Patterns in Early Celtic inscriptions: A Re-examination of *Celtic Messages and Images*', *Medieval Archaeology*, 46 (2002), 29–40.

⁸⁸ See also his popular introductions: C. Thomas, *Britain and Ireland in Early Christian Times AD 400–800* (London, 1971); *Celtic Britain* (London, 1986).

⁸⁹ In December 2005 he delivered the Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture on 'What is Cornwall?' at the British Academy.

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