

Martin de Tours – Also Known as Martyn de Tours or Martinus of Combe

A Re-Evaluation

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Abstract

This original paper re-evaluates the historical figure of Martin de Tours, a Norman landholder whose later reputation in Somerset, Devon, and the Welsh Marches has been shaped more by genealogical tradition than by contemporary evidence.

Drawing on the c.1121 Montacute Priory charter, Domesday Book folios, and modern prosopographical scholarship, it distinguishes the verifiable Martin—husband of Geva de Burci and father of Robert FitzMartin—from the legendary conqueror and “Marcher Lord” constructed by Victorian antiquaries.

The study situates the FitzMartin lineage, with a focus on Robert Fitzmartin, within the documented medieval landscape of Combe Martin, integrating evidence on mining, manorial organisation, parish development, and regional topography.

It further clarifies the family’s descent, culminating in the extinction of the senior male line in 1326 and the subsequent Audley inheritance.

By separating primary evidence from retrospective embellishment, the paper contributes to a more rigorous understanding of Norman landholding and regional identity formation in post-Conquest Britain.

Martin de Tours

Also known as Martyn de Tours or Martinus of Combe, this figure occupies a prominent place in genealogical traditions relating to Somerset, Devon, and Pembrokeshire. Yet contemporary evidence for his life is minimal.

This paper re-examines the historical Martin through surviving primary sources, evaluates later medieval and early modern narratives that embellished his reputation, and clarifies the origins of the FitzMartin family’s association with Combe Martin in North Devon.

Substantial new contextual material on Combe Martin’s medieval economy, mining history, manorial structure, parish development, and topographical evolution is integrated to situate the FitzMartin lineage within the broader historical landscape.

By distinguishing verifiable evidence from retrospective genealogical construction, this study contributes to a more rigorous understanding of Norman landholding, frontier politics, and the development of aristocratic identity in post-Conquest Britain.

Keywords

Martin de Tours; FitzMartin family; Combe Martin; Norman Conquest; Marcher lordship; genealogical memory; Domesday Book; medieval Devon; silver mining; manorial history.

Introduction

Martin de Tours has long been embedded in regional histories of the West Country and the Welsh Marches. Later genealogists and antiquaries attributed to him a range of military, territorial, and administrative achievements, including participation in the Norman Conquest and the subjugation of Welsh territories.

However, the contemporary record is sparse. This paper synthesises the available evidence and re-evaluates Martin's historical profile in light of modern scholarship, while integrating substantial historical material relating to Combe Martin — a settlement later associated with the FitzMartin family.

Historical Context: Norman Expansion and Frontier Governance

The Norman Conquest of 1066 initiated a profound restructuring of English landholding. William I redistributed estates to trusted followers, particularly in frontier regions bordering Wales, where semi-autonomous military governance later evolved into the Marcher lordship system (Davies 2000).

Although Martin is sometimes described as an early “Marcher Lord,” this terminology is anachronistic; the formal Marcher system developed gradually during the 12th century.

Evidence Base: Establishing the Historical Martin

The most reliable evidence for Martin derives from a charter issued by his son, Robert FitzMartin, c.1121, which identifies Robert's parents as *Martin* and *Geva*, daughter and heiress of Serlo de Burci (Monasticon Anglicanum, vol. 5). From this, three facts can be securely established:

1. Martin existed.
2. He married Geva de Burci.
3. Their son Robert inherited lands in Somerset and Devon.

The Battle Abbey Roll

There is scant contemporary evidence that Martin fought at Hastings, held military rank, conquered Welsh territory, or bore the title “Baron of Kemys.” These claims appear only in later genealogical compilations (Watson 1906).

The Norman “Battle Abbey Roll”—or rather, the *various later copies that claim to represent it*—is scattered across a few major archives.

Victorian antiquaries such as Powlett, Duchess of Cleveland, believed it derived from a Conquest-era muster-roll, but no evidence supports this and we may consider the tradition unhistorical.

No Reliable Norman Roll for the Battle of Hastings is Available

According to the antiquarian book “The Battle Abbey Roll” by C.L. Wilhelmina Powlett, Duchess of Cleveland in 1899, the list of Norman participants was allegedly “inscribed on a roll of parchment, and hung up in the Abbey Minster, with this superscription”:

"Dicitur a bello ' BELLUM ' locus hie, quia bello Angligenae victi sunt in morte relict, Martyris in Christi festo cecidere Calixti. Sexagenus erat sextus millesimus annus. Cum pereunt Angli, Stella monstrante cometa."

Powlett is not a primary source. There is no extant document from the 11th, 12th, or 13th century that contains such a list; every version we have is post-medieval (Douglas, D.C., 1999, *William The Conqueror*.)

Landholding and Inheritance

Through his marriage to Geva de Burci, Martin's family acquired estates including Low Ham, Pylle, and Hornblotton. Geva's subsequent marriage to William de Falaise (before 1086) brought additional Devon estates into the family, later inherited by Robert FitzMartin (Domesday Book 1086).

This reflects a broader Norman strategy of consolidating regional authority through marriage alliances with Anglo-Saxon or Breton landholders.

The Welsh Dimension: Cemaes and the Marcher Narrative

Claims that Martin subdued Welsh territories, seized Cemaes, or founded St Dogmael's Abbey are unsupported by contemporary evidence. Modern scholarship attributes these developments to Robert FitzMartin, not Martin (Smith 1998). St Dogmael's Abbey was founded c.1115–1118 by Robert (Davies 1995).

No 11th-century source links Martin personally to military activity in Wales. These Welsh exploits are best understood as later genealogical back-projections designed to enhance the family's prestige.

The Problem of Names: Retrospective Surnames and Dynastic Identity

The surname *Martin* was not used until the generation of Nicholas Martin (d. c.1260). Earlier individuals were identified patronymically (e.g., “Robert son of Martin”).

Later genealogists retroactively applied the surname “FitzMartin” to earlier generations to clarify lineage, creating the illusion of a stable dynastic identity in the 11th century (Complete Peerage, vol. VIII).

The last male heir was William Martin, 2nd Baron Martin, who died without issue on or shortly before April 4, 1326.

The Final Male Heir and Succession

- Last Male Heir: William Martin (the 2nd Baron) was the son of William Martin, 1st Baron Martin, and Eleanor FitzReynold. He was approximately 33 years old at the time of his death.
- Date of Extinction: His death in 1326 marked the end of the senior male line of the FitzMartin family that had begun with the historical Martin de Tours.

The Abeyance of the fitz Martin Barony

Because William died without children, his vast estates and the Barony of Martin were divided between his two sisters, causing the title to fall into abeyance (a state of suspension where no single person can claim the title).

The primary heirs listed in his *Inquisition Post Mortem* (the official record of his death and holdings) were:

1. Eleanor Martin: His elder sister (aged 40+ in 1326), widow of William de Hastings and wife of Philip de Columbers. She died without children in 1342.
2. James Audley: His nephew (the 2nd Baron Audley), son of his deceased sister Joan Martin and Nicholas de Audley.

Final Settlement

Following Eleanor's death in 1342, the entire Martin inheritance, including the lordship of Combe Martin and the Barony of Barnstaple, consolidated under James Audley. This transition effectively moved the family's historic lands into the Audley lineage, concluding the FitzMartin era.

Combe Martin: Landscape, Origins, and Early Settlement

Toponymy and Early History

The name *Combe Martin* combines the Old English *cumb* ("valley") with the Norman family name *Martin*. The survival of *cumb* in Devon reflects prolonged bilingual contact between Anglo-Saxons and Brittonic-speaking communities (Jackson 1953).

Evidence of Iron Age and Romano-British occupation survives at Newberry Hill, where a univallate hillfort overlooks the modern harbour (North Devon HER).

Domesday Context

Combe Martin does not appear under that name in the Domesday Book (1086). The area was likely included within a larger manor or recorded under a different toponym (Thorn & Thorn 1985).

Domesday does, however, record extensive Devon holdings belonging to Serlo de Burci and William de Falaise — estates that later formed the core inheritance of the FitzMartin family (Sanders 1960).

The FitzMartin Connection to Combe Martin

First Secure Evidence

The earliest documentary link between the FitzMartins and Combe Martin is a land exchange c.1198, when William FitzRobert FitzMartin exchanged land in Combe Martin with Warin de Morcells (Complete Peerage, vol. VIII). By the early 13th century, Combe Martin was firmly within the family's estate network.

As far as the author can ascertain: the 1198 date is significant because it represents the formal consolidation of the manor into the hands of the Martin (FitzMartin) lineage. The relationship between Warin de Morcells and Sibyl FitzMartin (i.e., "brother-in-law") is not universally attested in the surviving secondary literature.

- William FitzMartin (the son of Robert FitzMartin) was the head of the family at this time.
- The Counterparty: Warin de Morcells (sometimes spelled *de Moncellis*) was William's brother-in-law, having married William's sister, Sibyl.
- The Exchange: William gave Warin land elsewhere (specifically in Dartington, another Martin family seat) in exchange for Warin's interests or lands within Combe Martin.
- This cleared the way for the Martins to hold the manor of Combe Martin in its entirety, rather than it being split between family members or sub-tenants.

Manorial Structure and the Combe Martin Great Hall Tradition

Later antiquaries reported traditions of a medieval "castle" or Great Hall in Combe Martin, possibly located near the parish church and associated with a deer park (Snell 1906). While no physical evidence of a 'castle' exists and it is based on hearsay, the presence of a manorial centre and a deer park is consistent with FitzMartin landholding patterns.

Combe Martin's Medieval Economy

Silver Mining

Combe Martin became one of England's most significant medieval silver-lead mining centres. Mining is attested from the 13th century and continued intermittently for at least six centuries (Watts 1998). The mines contributed to royal finances during the reigns of Edward I and Edward III.

Wool, Hemp, and Agriculture

Alongside mining, Combe Martin supported a thriving wool and hemp economy. Hemp grown in the valley was used for rope, sailcloth, and shoemakers' thread (White 1879). The fertile shale soils supported orchards, market gardens, and extensive strawberry cultivation into the 19th century.

Parish Development and Local Governance

The parish system developed between the 7th and 9th centuries and became central to local governance in the Tudor period (Blair 2006). Combe Martin's medieval parish centred on St Peter ad Vincula Church, with a tithe barn used to store agricultural dues.

By the 16th century, the manor had fragmented, and governance shifted increasingly to parish officers and justices of the peace.

Combe Martin in the Early Modern and Modern Periods

Enclosure and Land Use

Nineteenth-century enclosure transformed the surrounding commons, including Knap Down, Girt Down, and Holdstone Down (National Archives MAF 1/88).

Martin's Legacy

Although Martin himself is obscure, his descendants became significant figures in the Welsh Marches and the West Country. Robert FitzMartin established the family's Welsh power base, later Martins were summoned to Parliament, and the barony fell into abeyance in the 14th century. Martin's historical importance lies less in his own actions and more in the genealogical memory constructed around him.

Conclusion

Martin de Tours exemplifies the challenges of reconstructing early Norman genealogy from sparse 11th-century records. The historical Martin emerges faintly from a single contemporary source: his son Robert's charter to Montacute Priory (c. 1121), identifying him as a Norman who married Geva de Burci and fathered a lineage that gained influence across Devon and Wales.

The legendary Martin—Conquest warrior, general, and "marcher lord"—appears only in retrospective 19th-century genealogies unsupported by Domesday or charter evidence.

Integrating Combe Martin's documented medieval landscape, silver mining, and manorial development clarifies the FitzMartin family's authentic regional footprint, with their first secure local connection appearing in William FitzRobert's 1198 land exchange.

Distinguishing primary evidence from Victorian folklore and antiquarian tradition remains essential for rigorous local history.

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Footnotes

1. For the only contemporary evidence naming Martin and Geva, see the charter of Robert *filius Martini* to Montacute Priory (c.1121), printed in Dugdale, W. (ed.) *Monasticon Anglicanum*, vol. 5, Montacute charters section.
2. On the Somerset and Devon estates later inherited by Robert through his mother Geva, see the *Domesday Book* entries for Serlo de Burci and William de Falaise; discussed in Maxwell Lyte, H.C. (1910) 'Falaise and Martin', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 56, pp. 30–40.
3. For Cemaes and St Dogmael's, the primary material concerns Robert FitzMartin, not Martin; see Davies, J.R. (1995) 'The Early History of St Dogmael's Abbey', *Journal of Welsh Ecclesiastical History*, 12, and the site overview in Heneb: Dyfed Archaeological Trust, *St Dogmaels* (online resource).

Lord Robert FitzMartin, Baron of Blagdon

Robert FitzMartin (late 11th century–c. 1159) was a prominent Norman knight and the first Lord of Cemaes or Kemes, a medieval territorial jurisdiction or lordship with its own courts, rights, and military obligations.

Born to Martin—whose family likely originated in the Vaux/Waels region of Normandy—and Geva de Burci, he inherited substantial estates through his mother, including the Burci and Blagdon lands in Somerset, as well as associated holdings in Dorset and Devon (Keats-Rohan, 1999; Sanders, 1960).

Robert held the lordship of Combe Martin, reflecting his significant landholdings in the region. He participated in the Norman invasions of Wales and eventually secured the barony of Cemais, establishing his stronghold at Nevern (Nanhyfer) (Maxwell-Lyte, 1919).

Robert founded St Dogmaels Abbey around 1115-1119 with his first wife, Maud Peverell, solidifying the Norman presence and religious influence in the region (Sanders, 1960).

Robert's military leadership was instrumental during the rebellion of 1135-1136, a substantial Welsh uprising triggered by the death of King Henry I. Robert successfully defended Cardigan Castle against Welsh incursions, solidifying its status as a key Norman stronghold (Maxwell-Lyte, 1919).

He married first to Maud Peverell and later to Alice de Nonant, with whom he had children, including William, who would later reclaim the lost lands of Cemais (Keats-Rohan, 1999). A local tale recounts the tragic drowning of one of Robert's sons in the moat at Combe Martin, though there's no known historical evidence to confirm this.

The "moat" in the tale refers to the water-filled defences of the family's administrative hall or fortified manor house, suspected to be near Combe Martin St. Peter ad Vincula Church.

FitzMartin is also associated with supporting the parish church in Combe Martin, dedicated to St. Peter ad Vincula (CMVHP, 2023), underscoring his role in local governance and religious patronage during the medieval period (Maxwell-Lyte, 1919).

The FitzMartin family continued to hold lands in both England and Wales, including Combe Martin, until the extinction of their senior line in 1326, with cadet branches persisting into modern times (Sanders, 1960).

Combe Martin was recorded as "Comer," and the "Martin" suffix became firmly established as the FitzMartin family used the manor as one of their primary seats in England while simultaneously ruling the Marcher Lordship of Cemais in Wales.

Robert FitzMartin's legacy is defined by his deliberate acquisition of land, his involvement in the Norman advance into Wales, and his support for emerging religious foundations. The continued prominence of his descendants further shaped the region, ensuring his lasting influence on the historical development of medieval Wales and England.

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Author's Notes:

Before Katharine S. B. Keats-Rohan's work in 1999, much of what was "known" about the FitzMartin family relied on Victorian-era genealogies or medieval abbey histories, which often mixed fact with legend, such as the idea that Robert's father was a great general under William the Conqueror.

The 1999 book applied modern prosopographical research (the study of social networks and family connections through legal documents) to prove:

1. Maternal Inheritance: Robert FitzMartin's principal wealth derived from his mother, Geva de Burci, rather than from any military achievements attributed to his father in later tradition.
2. Specific Origins: Modern prosopographical research places the family's continental origins in the Vaux (Walis/Waels) region of Normandy, correcting earlier claims that linked them to the city of Tours.
3. Accurate Timeline: The evidence confirms that Robert was active during the political transition from the reign of Henry I to that of Stephen.
4. Name and Tradition: The designation "Martin de Tours" or "de Turribus" appears only in later genealogical tradition; contemporary evidence does not support this styling, and modern scholarship situates the family's origins firmly in the Vaux/Waels/Walis area.
5. Critical Reassessment: This paper re-examines the historical Martin through surviving primary sources, distinguishing verifiable evidence from later genealogical constructions and local folklore.
6. Regional Integration: By integrating Combe Martin's medieval landscape, economy, and manorial development, the study clarifies the FitzMartin family's authentic regional connections while rejecting anachronistic claims of early military exploits, marcher authority, or foundational ties to Cemaes and St Dogmael's Abbey.
7. Primary Source Verification: All historical claims have been checked against primary sources, including the *Monasticon Anglicanum* charter of Robert FitzMartin (c.1121), Domesday Book folios for Serlo de Burci and William de Falaise, and twelfth-century St Dogmael's material.
8. Debunking Genealogical Embellishments: Assertions such as Martin's participation at Hastings, his supposed title "Baron of Kemys," or his alleged conquest of Cemaes have been evaluated and dismissed through cross-referencing with modern scholarship (Maxwell-Lyte 1910; Davies 1995).
9. Local Evidence and Folklore: Combe Martin-specific details align with North Devon HER data and local archaeological consensus. Victorian narratives and local folklore (Snell 1906; Watson 1906) are explicitly identified as retrospective traditions unsupported by contemporary evidence.

Credibility and Cross-Referencing

The information presented in the document on Lord Robert FitzMartin has been meticulously cross-referenced with multiple reputable historical sources.

Key texts, including Keats-Rohan (1999), Sanders (1960), and Maxwell-Lyte (1919), provide a solid foundation for the historical context and events associated with Robert FitzMartin's life and legacy.

Each claim has been evaluated for accuracy against established records and secondary literature, towards a reliable representation of Robert's role as a Norman knight and landowner in medieval Wales.

We have attempted to separate Combe Martin folklore and Victorian inventions from the verifiable historical record.

Learn More

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Glossary

- **Baron:** A noble title that denoted certain rights and landholding privileges. In the paper, it's referenced in relation to Martin's purported title, "Baron of Kemys."
- **Charter:** A formal document granting rights or property. The paper highlights a charter from c.1121, issued by Robert FitzMartin, identifying Martin as his father.
- **Cemaes:** A location in Wales associated with claims of military subjugation, often mistakenly attributed to Martin de Tours rather than his son Robert FitzMartin.
- **Combe Martin:** A village in North Devon, named from the Old English cumb, meaning valley. It serves as a focal point for the FitzMartin family's historical footprint.
- **Domesday Book:** A comprehensive survey from 1086 detailing landholdings across England, which does not mention Combe Martin explicitly but references estates held by Serlo de Burci and William de Falaise.
- **FitzMartin Family:** A lineage that traces its origins to Martin de Tours, significant in the genealogies of Somerset and Devon, particularly concerning landholdings in Combe Martin.
- **Genealogical Memory:** The collective narrative constructed around familial lineage, often embellished over time—a key theme in assessing the claims related to Martin's life.
- **Marcher Lord:** Nobility granted special governance and military authority in border regions after the Norman Conquest. Martin is informally described as an early "Marcher Lord," though this term is recognised as anachronistic.
- **Manorial Structure:** The organisation of landholdings and local governance typical in medieval England, reflecting power dynamics in Combe Martin's medieval history.

- **Mining History:** Refers to Combe Martin's significance as a silver-lead mining center from the 13th century onward, contributing to the local economy.
- **Norman Conquest:** The 1066 invasion of England by the Normans, leading to a significant reshaping of land ownership and governance structures.
- **Prosopographical Research:** The study of social networks and family connections through legal, administrative, and documentary sources.
- **Retrospective Surnames:** The application of the surname "FitzMartin" to ancestors who did not bear it, creating an illusion of dynastic continuity that is scrutinised in the paper.
- **Toponymy:** The study of place names and their meanings; the paper discusses Combe Martin's name as reflective of its geographic characteristics.

This glossary is tightly aligned with the specific terminology and concepts presented in the paper, aiding in the comprehension of its academic content.

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