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I

THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE *HISTORIA BRITTONUM*

David N. Dumville

The *Historia Brittonum* is a work which has loomed large in the study both of early mediaeval British history and of early Welsh literature. It is a witness to the history of Latin writing in Wales and to various aspects of the vernacular literary tradition. In particular its early and datable testimony to the varied development of the Arthurian legend has made it a text of particular interest to a wide range of mediaevalists.

While the *Historia* has been widely used, there has been a large hiatus in the detailed study of the text as a whole. The controversies which engulfed the work in the century separating Joseph Stevenson's edition (1838) from A. W. Wade-Evans's translation (1938) seem largely to have exhausted the interested scholarly community. An uneasy consensus about how to approach the work has marked the scholarship of the last generation.

However, work towards a new edition has necessarily reopened many of the old issues. Since I took up this task in the late 1960s, I have been brought to very different conclusions from those adopted, however uneasily, by scholars of the previous thirty years. I have made these clear in a number of detailed papers published since 1974. The practical result is that many users of the *Historia Brittonum* must now expect to ask new questions of the text and employ its evidence in a different way. Publication of my edition of the *Historia* has just begun: it seems to me that at this moment a statement about the date, sources, and genre of this extraordinary text, and about the uses to which historians can hope to put it, may provide a helpful backdrop against which students of literature may reassess their own approaches to and employment of the *Historia Brittonum*.

To what extent can we rely on any direct statements made by the author of the *Historia* about the early history of the British Isles? And how much historical evidence can we deduce from the work

about the milieu of the author himself? The second question, which seems to me to be by far the more profitable approach, has been largely ignored by historians. The former has consumed students of language, literature, history, and archaeology who have sought to employ the *Historia* as a prime source for the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries; but the only thing which has united them has been an agreement that this work was indeed a suitable quarry for materials relating to the history of these centuries.

When the *Historia Brittonum* – under its all-purpose title of ‘Nennius’ – is presented to students of British history, it has customarily been accompanied by the words of Dr J. N. L. Myres, published in 1936 in his contribution to the *Oxford History of England*.¹ ‘There remains’, he says, after a survey of the other literary evidence for the period of the English settlements,

the *Historia Brittonum*, a compilation composed or edited early in the ninth century by a Welshman Nennius or Nemnius, whose notion of historical method is best described in his own words. *Coacervavi*, he says, *omne quod inveni* – ‘I have made a heap of all that I have found’. It is customary to treat this uncritical attitude of Nennius as a fatal objection to the *Historia Brittonum* as a source for the period. [I may interject here that in 1936 it was only English historians who thought so.] In fact, of course, it is the one thing which saves it from the contempt into which later writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Henry of Huntingdon have fallen. Had Nennius used his sources with the same literary skill which they employed, he would have lost the interest of historians as completely as they have done. It is precisely his ignorance and his stupidity which caused him to jumble together good and bad materials without amalgamating them into a single whole, and each successive commentary on the evolution of his curious book makes it more possible to sort out the different elements of which it is composed. But while it may be agreed that some scraps in the heap are more valuable than others, that some indeed provide information unobtainable elsewhere, it is not from such material as this that a satisfactory history of the time can be made.

A few years later Sir Frank Stenton, again taking up the point about English historians’ general hostility to the *Historia Brittonum*, wrote in his volume of the *Oxford History*:²

At present there is no general agreement about the authority of the different parts of the work which passes under the name of Nennius . . . Much that has been written about Nennius is hypercritical, but it is clear that no section of his work should be used without extreme caution and

¹ R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford, 1936; 2nd edn, 1937), pp. 329–30. Cf. J. N. L. Myres, *The English Settlements* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 16–18.

² F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943; 2nd edn, 1947), p. 684; (3rd edn, 1971), p. 694.

many reservations. For Anglo-Saxon history in the strict sense the most important feature of the work is a series of notes, mainly on Northumbrian history, which Nennius or another has added to a set of English royal genealogies. There are obvious mistakes in the notes, but they seem to represent an authentic tradition.

The combined authority of Myres and Stenton has carried the day, and insofar as one can speak of a generally accepted view of the *Historia Brittonum*, it has been theirs.

– Anyone who is introduced to this work is generally offered two editions: that of Theodor Mommsen, published in 1894, often described as ‘definitive’; and that of Ferdinand Lot, published forty years later, whose text is a degenerate reprint of Mommsen’s with a thinned-out apparatus, but who for the first time prefixed to an edition of this work a detailed discussion of its content and an attempt at an assessment of its sources and its historical value. Lot’s work is characterised by a fierce Gallic contempt for his author; in Myres’s words,³ Lot’s edition is ‘a characteristically original and lively work, of which the usefulness is somewhat marred by the editor’s habit of dismissing statements of his text whose meaning is not self-evident as mere instances of Nennian imbecility’. In my opinion, both editions are unusable. Textually, Mommsen’s edition is a conflate of a series of recensions, muddled together without any regard to the very varied times and places in which these versions were composed; and his introduction was devoted exclusively to distinguishing a series of families of manuscripts and to discussing the finer points involved in the restoration of allegedly corrupt passages. Lot’s pioneering discussions of content and sources were made less valuable by his need to rely on Mommsen’s incomplete textual investigations, and by his ignorance of Celtic philology, this last being a defect shared by all previous editors. And, as generally with the editors of mediaeval texts until recent years, those same editors had been trained in Classical Latin, with all the prejudices which that necessarily instilled. If I had today to recommend to students a text of the *Historia Brittonum*, pending completion of the new edition, my choice would fall on one of two books: the edition of Joseph Stevenson, *Nennii Historia Britonum*, published in 1838, remains an unpretentious conflated text (with a clear textual introduction) based securely on the primary ‘Harleian’ version; or, better, the

³ Collingwood & Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p. 479; Myres, *The English Settlements*, p. 225, notes Lot’s edition ‘among the older commentaries . . . worth a mention, if only as period pieces’.

text presented by Edmond Faral in the third volume of his great work of 1929, *La légende arthurienne*, gives a simple print of all the matter in Harley 3859 (including the Welsh annals and royal genealogies), with a parallel text – as far as it went – from the eleventh-century Chartres manuscript.⁴

The textual history of the *Historia Brittonum* is indeed rather complicated, and I shall mention it again at the end of this paper. For the moment, its chief relevance is that two quite contradictory views about its development have been repeated by eminent scholars, neither of which is well founded but both of which have extraordinary implications for the authorship and purpose of the *Historia*. The first, advanced by Rudolf Thurneysen and repeated on a number of occasions by Kenneth Jackson,⁵ would have us believe that ‘Nennius’ was responsible for a series of recensions of his work, in the last of which alone – the so-called ‘Nennian’ recension – he added the prologue bearing his name; this view, which defers to the textual history just far enough to accept that the prologue does not belong to the primary text of the *Historia*, ignores the evidence regarding the dates and areas of origin of the various recensions and, in particular, the fact of their widely varying latinity. The second view, propounded particularly by Ferdinand Lot, wholly disregarded the textual history of the work, and invited us to believe – with an embarrassing lack of supporting testimony – that the prologue had somehow gone missing from the primary (and every other early) version, being perhaps associated with some abridgment of the work, and that the universal anonymity of the *Historia* in its early years was due to this unfortunate accident.⁶

The plain fact of the matter is that the attribution to ‘Ninnius’ is a secondary and late development in the textual history. I have discussed this fully elsewhere and have concluded, on a mixture of textual and linguistic evidence, that the writing of the prologue and

⁴ *Nennii Historia Britonum*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (London, 1938); *Chronica Minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII.*, ed. Theodor Mommsen (3 vols, Berlin, 1891-8), III.111-222; Edmond Faral, *La légende arthurienne: Études et documents, Les plus anciens textes* (3 vols, Paris, 1929), III.1-62; Ferdinand Lot, *Nennius et l'Historia Brittonum. Etude critique suivie d'une édition des diverses versions de ce texte* (2 vols, Paris, 1934).

⁵ R. Thurneysen (in a review of Mommsen's edition), *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 1 (1896/7), 157-68, at pp.163-6; Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 48, and ‘On the northern British section in Nennius’, in *Celt and Saxon. Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. Nora K. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1963; rev. imp., 1964), pp. 20-62, at 55.

⁶ Lot, *Nennius*, especially I.6-7, 16-19, 145-6.

the general fashioning of the recension to which it belongs is to be assigned to the eleventh century.⁷ The author of the primary recension, a Welsh Latin text assignable to the year 829/30 (the fourth year of King Merfyn of Gwynedd), remains anonymous. In itself, this might seem a trivial conclusion, but if we recall to mind the far-reaching impression of ‘ignorance and stupidity’, to use Myres's words, ‘a dim-witted and muddle-headed person’, to use Jackson's,⁸ which the Nennian prologue has left in the minds of modern historians, and the impression that his lack of literary skill ‘caused him to jumble together good and bad materials without amalgamating them into a single whole’,⁹ we shall observe that this has allowed historians of the post-War generation to believe that from this dolt's uncritical heap can be extracted a quantity of usable historical evidence for the fifth to seventh centuries, deriving from good early sources which he has largely left unaltered. This is not a small or trivial matter, and on this note we may now turn to the text, accepting it – I hope – on its own terms, without the preconceptions inspired by the bogus prologue.¹⁰

What we see is, in my view, a synchronising history – a form with which students of Irish history and literature are already quite familiar. The point about a synchronising history is that it attempts, though rarely with complete success, to provide a smooth account of a period of history by combining all the available, and often wildly contradictory, witnesses into a slick, coherent, and ‘official’ whole. The ‘harmonisation’ (in Old Irish, *comuaimm* ‘a stitching together’¹¹) is the important process. In Eoin MacNeill's words,¹²

⁷ D.N. Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975/6), 78-95. On the basis of new developments in the study of Leabhar na hUidhre and of Welsh manuscript-sources, I should now have sufficient confidence to assign this recension to a marginally earlier date than the mid-eleventh century.

⁸ Jackson, ‘On the northern British section’, p. 57.

⁹ Myres, *apud* Collingwood & Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p. 329.

¹⁰ Professor Henry Loyn kindly reminded me, in discussion, that of course it is unnecessary to take the words of the prologue literally; the use of this topos of ignorance as a *captatio benevolentiae* was perfectly common in mediaeval prefaces. However, the point here is that modern historians have taken it literally and, moreover, have built their views of the original ninth-century text on this reading.

¹¹ Cf. J. Carney, ‘The Old Irish accentual poems’, *Ériu* 22 (1971), 23-80, at pp. 51-2, for brief comment.

¹² *Celtic Ireland* (Dublin, 1921), pp. 37-8.

The probability is that after a certain amount of tentative history-building had gone on in a random way, the subject began to attract the attention of the schools. Once in their hands the work had to be done thoroughly and systematically. Stories could not pass for histories unless they fitted together, in time and in all other relations. The schools, therefore, set themselves to collect all the ancient traditions of the nation, weaving them into a single fabric, with dates and a regular succession and correlation of events. . . .

Along with the stories, it was necessary to harmonize the genealogies, which are the bone-work of the history . . . the whole general process was going on in the schools in the ninth century.

(We now know, in fact, that this work was in progress in Ireland much earlier than the ninth century.¹³) MacNeill went on to make the vital point that early efforts inevitably suffered from chronological confusion.¹⁴ Rival views emanated from different schools, and were only gradually and with difficulty reconciled or harmonised.

In Ireland, the final scheme was that in the eleventh-century *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and the works of the eleventh-century poets – themselves ‘synthetic historians’ – Flann Mainistrech and Gilla Coemáin, plus – of course – the great collections of genealogies embodied in twelfth-century manuscripts, of which the surviving representatives are Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawlinson B.502 and the Book of Leinster.

I suggest that, in the *Historia Brittonum*, we have an early example, perhaps the earliest, of a Welsh attempt at constructing a similar synthetic history. It certainly does not represent the earliest work of harmonisation and synchronisation, for the secular men of learning, particularly concerned with genealogy, had already been at work, as Dr Molly Miller has so ably shown us. In 1968, Mr Bartrum asked ‘Was there a British “Book of Conquests”?’¹⁵ He does not seem to have considered the possibility that the *Historia Brittonum* was just such a book, but instead suggested that there perhaps was one in existence by the twelfth century. And I think that I have some evidence that, in twelfth-century Wales, a sort of super-*Historia Brittonum* was being written, again in Latin, of

¹³ See, for example, J. Carney, ‘Early Irish Literature: the state of research’, in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies*, edd. Gearóid Mac Eoin et al. (Dublin, 1983), pp.113-30; cf. D. Dumville, ‘Language, literature, and law in medieval Ireland: some questions of transmission’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 9 (1985), 91-8.

¹⁴ *Celtic Ireland*, p.38.

¹⁵ P.C. Bartrum, ‘Was there a British “Book of Conquests”?’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 23 (1968-70), 1-6.

which we have some fragments preserved in a north English manuscript *ca* 1200.¹⁶ There is, at any rate, a good deal of evidence to suggest that in Welsh learned circles in the earlier middle ages a fair amount of attention was being paid to genealogical work, to collection of stories, their reduction to order (as in the *Triads*),¹⁷ and their harmonisation (for example within the increasingly avaricious Arthurian cycle). To my mind, the harmonisation and, above all, the synchronisation proper to such activity in Celtic literary circles is very apparent in the *Historia Brittonum*.¹⁸ We must also reckon, I think, with the possibility of Irish influence, for an early version of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (possibly in Old Irish rather than Latin) was available to the author and may have been an inspiration to him.¹⁹

— The reaction of Irish scholars to this sort of attitude is now unequivocal. They reject wholly this material as the source of political history for the period with which it pretends to deal, for it is seen to be wholly fictional; its manipulation may, however, be studied with profit as evidence for shifting political attitudes and for developments in cultural activity. It has been recognised that there must be established an approximate date for what historians of illiterate and newly literate societies have come to describe as the ‘historical horizon’ of record.²⁰ Controversy about St Patrick and about the early recording of Irish annals has helped to clarify this issue; annal-writing in Ireland cannot be assigned to a period much before *ca* 550.²¹ Living memory at that stage might have carried

¹⁶ Cf. D.N. Dumville, ‘Celtic-Latin texts in northern England, c.1150-c.1250’, *Celtica* 12 (1977), 19-49.

¹⁷ *Triodd Ynys Prydein. The Welsh Triads*, ed. & transl. Rachel Bromwich (2nd edn, Cardiff, 1978).

¹⁸ In my paper, ‘Some aspects of the chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 25 (1972-4), 439-45, at pp.444-5, I have already made the point that the calculation of the date 428, for the *adventus Saxonum*, was perhaps the first achieved in Wales by the author of the *Historia Brittonum* and under the influence of English concern about discovering a date for this ‘event’.

¹⁹ But, for doubts about this, see P. Sims-Williams, ‘The evidence for vernacular Irish literary influence on early mediaeval Welsh literature’, in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe. Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, edd. Dorothy Whitelock et al. (Cambridge, 1982), pp.235-57 at 246-7.

²⁰ For an essential qualification of this remark, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin in his notes to the second edition (1981) of MacNeill, *Celtic Ireland*, p.190 (ad p.57).

²¹ See, for example, A.P. Smyth, ‘The earliest Irish annals: their first contemporary entries, and the earliest centres of recording’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 72 C (1972), 1-48; K. Harrison, ‘Epacts in Irish chronicles’, *Studia Celtica* 12/13 (1977/8), 17-32.

record back into the later fifth century.²² Before that, nothing is clear. Further, a new generation of historians in Ireland has made great advances in the study of the early mediaeval manipulation for political purposes of genealogies and the associated origin-legends, and even of the annalistic chronicles – especially in their early stages. There is a growing recognition that these materials cannot be taken at face-value, especially where they deal with events which are beyond the historical horizon. If we accept that origin-legends, for example, could be orally transmitted to a mediaeval point of record, unaltered and with sufficient chronological data so as to render them available and useful to modern historians, we shall have deliberately ignored the fact that the *filidh*, the very means of preservation, the cultivators of *senchas* or native learning, were the people responsible for the harmonisation and synchronisation of these oral records and their adaptation for political motives.²³ We do not, of course, have to do with preservation of record by the early Irish equivalent of the man on the Clapham omnibus, with no particular axe to grind: the keeping of record was an aristocratic, and intensely political, business.

The implications of this Irish digression should be sufficiently obvious for the Welsh situation. The plentifulness of surviving Irish record in various spheres has been contrasted, *ad nauseam*, with the relative paucity of Welsh material. But there is a lesson here for us. If, with the abundance of Irish material and the checks and balances which derive from the inevitable discrepancies, it is still not possible to reduce to historical credibility the legends relating to the period before the historical horizon of native record, not to mention many referring to a later period,²⁴ how much less shall we be able to accept the small surviving percentage of Welsh learned legends when we lack most of its native intellectual context?²⁵

Let us turn now to the treatment of the British fifth century by the author of the *Historia Brittonum*. There are five major issues,

²² Compare the position in early Anglo-Saxon England: see, for instance, Frank Merry Stenton, *Preparatory to 'Anglo-Saxon England'* (Oxford, 1970), pp.116-22, reprinting a paper of 1926.

²³ On this subject see F.J. Byrne, 'Senchas: the nature of Gaelic historical tradition', *Historical Studies* [Irish Conference of Historians] 9 (1974), 137-59.

²⁴ Cf. D.N. Dumville, "'Beowulf' and the Celtic world: the uses of evidence", *Traditio* 37 (1981), 109-60, especially pp.132-7.

²⁵ On the Welsh context see P.P. Sims-Williams, 'Some functions of origin stories in early medieval Wales', in *History and Heroic Tale. A Symposium*, edd. Tore Nyberg *et al.* (Odense, 1985), pp. 97-131.

comprising the whole central section of the *Historia*: (1) Hengest and Horsa and the *primus aduentus Saxonum*, the colonisation of Kent, and the invaders' dealings with Gwrtheyrn and Gwrthefyr; (2) Gwrtheyrn and St Garmon (including the *dinnshenchas* of Foel Fenlli); (3) the *dinnshenchas* of Dinas Emrys; (4) St Patrick; and (5) Arthur. These groups of material are sometimes intertwined, sometimes laid end to end, but always with connecting passages. The result is a superficially continuous history, where the gaps have been glossed over; but this actually discontinuous record is occasioned by evident chasms in the author's sources of knowledge.

I think that the first point to be made is that the fifth century seems to be beyond the historical horizon of native British record. The thin line in literary record which allows us to travel from the Roman period to the later sixth century is the work of Patrick in the later fifth century and that of Gildas about the middle of the sixth, plus the series of more or less datable inscriptions on stone from those parts of Britain which remained in Celtic hands throughout much of the early middle ages.²⁶ If we consider the body of later Welsh legend, we seem to be part of a world which begins after the mid-sixth century; it is as if the plague (of 549) which we know to have been so disastrous in Ireland was even more so in Britain. But in Britain there is another factor.

The middle of the sixth century forms the major watershed in our post-Roman history. The century and a half during which the Celtic-speaking people of Britain held sway in their own island after the collapse of Roman authority seems to have formed little more than an anomalous interlude between the Imperial past and the barbarian future. The stubborn resistance of the Britons to English advance kept by far the greater part of the island – and, indeed, of what is now England – in Celtic hands. But after 550 came a rapid collapse. In 633 Cadwallon of Gwynedd may have thoroughly devastated Northumbria, but it was an English-settled Northumbria which he was attempting to destroy;²⁷ of the Britons of the north we hear nothing, and the year 638 – five years later – is supposed to see the fall of Edinburgh to the English and the

²⁶ *Saint Patrick: Confession et Lettre à Coroticus*, ed. & transl. R.P.C. Hanson & C. Blanc (Paris, 1978); *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. & transl. Michael Winterbottom (Chichester, 1978); R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum* (2 vols, Dublin, 1945/49); V.E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950).

²⁷ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, II.20.

collapse of Gododdin.²⁸ Cadwallon was a Welsh king making a successful attack on England; with our hindsight, we can hardly see him as more than that. In the first half of the sixth century, Gildas was able to acquire a first-class Latin education which our professional latinists of today – Kerlouégan, Winterbottom, Lapidge – assure us is the Latin of the secular rhetorical schools. (The ninth-century and later stories about Gildas receiving his education from St Illtud are the window-dressing of mediaeval monastic hagiographers who were assuredly even more ignorant than we are about education in Britain *ca* A.D. 500.)²⁹ The surviving inscriptions show the use of Roman capitals. We have the evidence of Roman titles – *magistratus*, *medicus*, *protector*, *ciuis*, and perhaps *consul*: I hardly need to repeat the often rehearsed evidence. In the second half of the sixth century, however, the curtain comes down on literary activity. The next Latin writings belong to the end of the eighth century.³⁰ The script of stone inscriptions becomes vulgar – developments of the Insular script principally associated with Ireland. The titles which I mentioned just now disappear. Commemoration is for christian purposes only. And in Welsh sources we completely lose sight of England east of the Welsh marches and Devon. The heroic age of the North is with us, and it is of course that brief heroic age which comes to dominate much of the early Welsh literary tradition. We lose whatever record there may have been of the foundation of the post-Roman kingdoms in Wales, already in existence by Gildas's time, not to mention those which must have existed in what is now England. In the south we catch a fleeting glimpse of them in English sources in the mention of three kings in connexion with the battle of Dyrham in 577,³¹ and in the

²⁸ For this hypothesis, see K. H. Jackson, 'Edinburgh and the Anglian occupation of Lothian', in *The Anglo-Saxons. Studies in Some Aspects of their History and Culture presented to Bruce Dickins*, ed. Peter Clemoes (London, 1959), pp. 35-42.

²⁹ See M. Lapidge, 'Gildas's education and the Latin culture of sub-Roman Britain', in *Gildas: New Approaches*, edd. Michael Lapidge & D. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 27-50 and references given there; on St Illtud, see pp. 32-3.

³⁰ For the intervening period, see now D. Dumville, 'Late-seventh- or eighth-century evidence for the British transmission of Pelagius', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 10 (1985), 39-52.

³¹ In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, *sub anno*; on Ceawlin's dates see D. N. Dumville, 'The West Saxon Genealogical Regnal List and the chronology of early Wessex', *Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland* 4 (1985); in general see P. Sims-Williams, 'The settlement of England in Bede and the Chronicle', *Anglo-Saxon England* 12 (1983), 1-41.

North in the brief appearance in our sources of Ceredig, king of Elfed in south Yorkshire.³²

I have hammered the point long enough. The mid-sixth century, or even a little later, is the horizon in Welsh historical record because the third quarter of the sixth century was a time of startling upheaval in Britain. It was the period in which England and Wales were really born. And when we come to look at how our Welsh writer of the early ninth century attempted to construct his own 'synthetic history' – to use MacNeill's term – we can understand his assumptions and his difficulties in relation to the period between 388 and 547.

These *termini* are deliberately chosen. For in the dark age of Welsh history between the cataclysm of the later sixth century and the more outward-looking Wales which emerged (after two centuries of near-isolation) in the later eighth, the native learned classes, secular and ecclesiastical, had been hard at work. A series of basic historical *dicta* had been developed. One of these was that Roman Britain had ended with the death of Magnus Maximus in 388, and that from the descendants of this last British emperor all legitimate post-Roman power flowed. The result was a series of genealogies relating existing royal pedigrees to Maximus by way of marriages to invented daughters of Maximus (as for Powys and Cornwall) or by claiming direct descent from him (as did the kings of Dyfed and, most importantly, the second dynasty of Gwynedd); in the process this gave some of the northern heroes Maximid ancestry.³³

The author of the *Historia Brittonum* ends his Roman history with Magnus Maximus, and turns at once to his British successors. He offers us two of these. To one, Cunedda, we shall return very briefly, later on. To another, Gwrtheyrn (or Vortigern), is devoted a good deal of attention. He is presented as a king who holds sway over southeastern England, but there is never any attempt at a definition of his territories. The constituent parts of his story are five: a small section drawn from Bede; a narrative based on an English source, possibly oral but probably not, dealing with the wars between the English and the Britons; an account of his dealings with St Garmon of Powys, leading to his death; a folktale account of his troubles at Dinas Emrys; and a genealogy of a minor Powys dynasty which claimed descent from him and held the land

³² Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV.23 (21); *Annales Cambrie*, s.a. 172 = A.D. 616.

³³ See D. N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: history and legend', *History*, N.S., 62 (1977), 173-92, especially pp. 179-81.

largiente Ambrosio – according to our author. All these have been woven together, fairly roughly, to form a continuous narrative. The only two sections which have been seen as offering historical information are (1) the English material which forms the framework of the Vortigern story and (2) the account of St Garmon. It is hardly necessary to say that the story of Gwrtheyrn and Garmon commands no historical credibility. Our author was a reader of Bede and knew that St Germanus of Auxerre was on the loose in Britain at approximately the right time. If the equation of Garmon and Germanus of Auxerre had not already been made by his source – and I rather doubt that it had – it was a simple one for him to make in the process of harmonising his sources. The equation is of course unacceptable³⁴ – even the philological equivalence of the two names has been challenged by a powerful authority.³⁵ In the *Life of St Garmon*, we see a statement of the dependence of the Powys dynasty on the church and cult of St Garmon *in the early ninth century*; the Pillar of Elise offers us the official secular statement of the same relationship.³⁶ For it is an axiom of Celtic hagiography that the alleged founder of a dynasty (Cadell in the *Historia Brittonum*, Gwrtheyrn on the Pillar-inscription) be shown to be dependent on the favour of the dynastic or territorial saint, in this case Garmon. Dr Myres's suggestion of 1960 that this story is a reflection of the Pelagian controversy in the fifth century is sheer fantasy.³⁷

The English material is much more difficult to assess. The names of Vortigern and his sons are presented to us in Old Welsh guise. Were they in some form in the source, or are they a Welsh insertion? If the latter, the material becomes impossible to handle. But since the story ties up in outline with that told by Gildas and particularly Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and is fuller than theirs, we can probably accept it as representing more or less faithfully an English account current in the early ninth century.

³⁴ Myres, *The English Settlements*, p.17, n.1, sticks to the old opinion.

³⁵ Melville Richards, quoted by R.W.D. Fenn, 'Who was St Harmon?', *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society* 36 (1966), 50-5, at p. 55, n.15. Cf. M. Richards, 'Places and persons of the early Welsh Church', *Welsh History Review* 5 (1970/1), 333-49, at pp. 335, 348.

³⁶ P. C. Bartrum (ed.), *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff, 1966), pp.1-3; cf. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain', pp.185-7.

³⁷ J.N.L. Myres, 'Pelagius and the end of Roman rule in Britain', *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960), 21-36; it is astonishing to find him repeating this in *The English Settlements*, p.17. Cf. the remarks of R. A. Markus, 'Pelagianism: Britain and the Continent', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37 (1986), 191-204.

The point to be emphasised about this circumstantial and detailed account, which depends in the story about the massacre of the British nobles on a literary play on the words *Saxones* and *saxas* also found in the work of Widukind of Corvey,³⁸ is that it is of English origin, and that even if it were served up to us in an eighth- or ninth-century English manuscript it would be unacceptable as historical evidence for the early or mid-fifth century. It is not the stuff of which history is made, but is instead saga-material of the sort plentifully attested for England and studied, for example, by C. E. Wright.³⁹

Observe, nonetheless, how our author has used English source-material as the framework for his account. We shall meet this interesting circumstance again.

He continues, having tidily taken 'Germanus' back to Gaul, with St Patrick, alleged disciple of Germanus. The account of him is a collection of excerpts from the late seventh-century works by Muirchú and Tírechán, with some additional material now paralleled in the *Vita Tertia* and the Tripartite Life.⁴⁰ This section is of little importance for us at this stage.

After Patrick, we pass back to the Anglo-British wars, first to the descendants of Hengest and then to Arthur. It was proposed many years ago by the Chadwicks⁴¹ that this account of Arthur derived from a Welsh battle-catalogue poem such as those on Cynan Garwyn and Cadwallon, and this has (I think) received general acceptance.⁴² The point here, of course, is that such catalogues – especially when composed centuries after the event, like that on Cadwallon – bear no particular relation to the historical circumstances of the period of the subject. Such a poem is evidence only for the extent of the development of the Arthurian

³⁸ Cf. H. Munro Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, 1907), pp.41-2 (2nd edn, 1924, p.39); see also M. O. Anderson, 'Dalriada and the creation of the kingdom of the Scots', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, edd. Whitelock *et al.*, pp.106-32, at 116-17.

³⁹ *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh, 1939).

⁴⁰ For the *uitae* of St Patrick, see Ludwig Bieler & F. Kelly (ed. & transl.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979); *Four Latin Lives of St Patrick*. Colgan's *Vita Secunda*, *Quarta*, *Tertia*, and *Quinta*, ed. Ludwig Bieler (Dublin, 1971); *Bethu Phátraic. The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, ed. Kathleen Mulchrone (Dublin, 1939).

⁴¹ H. Munro Chadwick & N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (3 vols, Cambridge, 1932-40), I.154-5.

⁴² But it was taken by our author from a written source, as is shown by his misinterpretation of Old Welsh *scuit*: cf. further R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975/6), 163-81.

legend by 830, and not for the historicity of Arthur or the alleged events of *ca* A.D. 500. In general, our ignorance of the political history of the British fifth century is almost total; in my view, it is not legitimate to seek to lighten this darkness by the use of unhistorical sources offered by a writer whose ignorance was complete and whose concept of history did not require him to distinguish between certain types of evidence, as we must do. We must seek alternative testimony which will introduce us to other areas of fifth-century culture.

From Arthur, with the connecting sentence 'Et reges a Germania deducebant ut regnarent super illos in Britannia, usque ad tempus quo Ida regnavit ...' we leap straight to the other *terminus* of this murky period, A.D. 547. The date derives from another English source used by our author, and marks the beginning of a new stage in his History – what has been called the 'North British section' – which extends to 685 and deals exclusively with north British affairs. Its framework is provided by what I have called, in another connexion, 'the Anglian collection of royal genealogies and regnal lists',⁴³ a text which survives to us in English manuscripts. It is this section of the work which has *seemed* to possess most historical credibility and which has been most valued by historians of the early mediaeval North.

There are three vital questions. What were the Celtic sources of this section? What is their quality? And, finally, how does our author use these sources? The last question has often been answered in the light of the unhappy assumptions mentioned at the outset, which derive from a literal reading of the bogus prologue: the author has heaped up his sources and not attempted to manipulate them to any purpose; they are ripe for taking and using.

What, then, are these sources? The 'North British section' has always been the source of horrifyingly – and to my mind quite unnecessarily – complicated theories of development, the latest of which are Kenneth Jackson's and Molly Miller's.⁴⁴ Having published a detailed rebuttal of Jackson's theories, I do not wish to go into too much detail here. Let me concentrate instead on what I should

⁴³ *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), 23-50.

⁴⁴ Jackson, 'On the northern British section'; M. Miller, 'The foundation-legend of Gwynedd in the Latin texts', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 27 (1976-8), 515-32. For my reply to Jackson, see D. N. Dumville, 'On the north British section of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Welsh History Review* 8 (1976/7), 345-54.

regard as the minimum 'prehistory' of this part of the text. First, the latinity is of a piece with that of the rest of the work; this view was urged by Joseph Loth in 1932 and, after a detailed study, I should affirm it strongly.⁴⁵ I see no need for the assumption that an 'Original Northern History' ever existed, to be more or less bodily attached to the rest of the *Historia Brittonum*. The whole work seems to me to be built on the same synchronising pattern. I think that we need posit only two Celtic sources for this part of the text. We must remember that the amount of non-English material here is remarkably slight. The first is a set of north-British annals, related to that used as a source for *Annales Cambrie* but probably slightly fuller than their surviving record. We can document the existence of such a north-British chronicle also from its use in the Irish annals.⁴⁶ The few remaining items would be drawn from our author's knowledge of Welsh learned tradition about the Gwynedd dynasty and the figures of the Old North.

Dr Kathleen Hughes denied that our author's source was annalistic. 'If it was', she asked, 'why did the compiler of the *Historia* have to turn to an Anglo-Saxon king-list to provide his chronological structure?'⁴⁷ This is easily answered. If the author of the *Historia* had before him a set of laconic annals, perhaps (like the Harleian annals) with no absolute dates, although this is far from certain, he would have faced an insuperable task in attempting to construct even a skeletal history of the period. By adopting a Northumbrian regnal list as the basis of his account, however, he has gained a coherent and dated structure which he would otherwise have lacked. Also, it seems that he had more English than British material available concerning this period. There is no reason to believe in Dr Hughes's memoranda, or in Professor Jackson's 'Original Northern History'. Annals – which we know on other grounds to have existed – are sufficient for our purpose.

Let us examine the use to which our author put this source. For one thing, he had to synchronise its entries with his English framework, the Northumbrian regnal list. Let us first consider a case where we *know* him to have bungled the job. *Annales*

⁴⁵ J. Loth, 'Remarques à l'*Historia Brittonum* dite de Nennius', *Revue celtique* 49 (1932), 150-65 and 51 (1934), 1-31, at pp. 153-65; cf. R. L. Thomson, 'British Latin and English history. Nennius and Asser', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society (Literary and Historical Section)* 18 (1982), 38-53.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Hughes, *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages. Studies in Scottish and Welsh Sources* (Woodbridge, 1980), pp. 70-2, 91-7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Cambrie put the death by plague of Cadwaladr of Gwynedd in the early 680s – rightly, as far as we can see. But our author has tied this up with the reign of Oswiu (642-670), mistakenly associating the plague with the great pestilence of 664 recorded by Bede.⁴⁸ There are errors too in his synchronisation of purely English affairs: by no known reckoning did Gregory the Great send Augustine to Kent in the reign of Frithuwald of Bernicia (579-585).⁴⁹

Then there is the question of interpretative writing. *Annales Cambrie* give three successive entries: (1) *Strages Gaii campi*; (2) *Pantha occisio*; (3) *Osguid uenit et predam duxit*. This laconic series gives an acceptable version which can be reconciled with Bede's account.⁵⁰ The *Historia Brittonum* certainly had a fuller source which may indeed have included the phrase *edfryd Iddew*. I think that we must wonder if this 'restoration' or 'restitution' occurred in quite the circumstances suggested by our author; certainly Bede's account is rather different; and the *Annales* have as their last entry in the series, *Osguid uenit et predam duxit*. However we may try to rearrange the evidence, we are driven to Kenneth Jackson's conclusion that the account in the *Historia Brittonum* must be 'rearranged so as to remove the chronological contradiction'.⁵¹ The fact is that our author's account, with its mangled chronology and its backward look, is a blatant piece of interpretative writing; it is itself an attempt to discover cause and effect – a historian's view of the situation, not (as old views of the text would have it) a heap of unsullied verities gathered together by a mere compiler.

Let us look at another item, which has particularly exercised students of Welsh literature, that dealing with the poets. After a brief account of Ida of Bernicia (547-559 by the official Northumbrian chronology), the author continues '*Tunc* Outigirn [Eudeyrn] *in illo tempore* demicabat contra gentem Anglorum.

⁴⁸ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III.27 and 30. Cf. the Annals of Ulster, *sub annis* 664-668.

⁴⁹ The death of St Cuthbert at Lindisfarne during the reign of Ecgrith, king of Northumbria (*ob.* 20 May 685), is also erroneous; Cuthbert died in 687. But the manuscripts' *obiit in insula* may be scribal error in their archetype for *abiit in insulam*, and refer to Cuthbert's acquisition of the see of Lindisfarne in March 685, or his first withdrawal to Farne as a solitary in about 676. For a parallel to the suggested corruption, see Paul Lehmann, 'Fuldaer Studien', *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Philosophisch-philologische und historische Klasse, Jahrgang 1925, 3. Abhandlung, pp. 42-3.

⁵⁰ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III.24.

⁵¹ 'On the northern British section', p. 37.

Tunc Talhaern Tat Aguen in poemate claruit; et Neirin et Taliessin ... simul uno tempore in poemate claruerunt.' The next section deals with King Maelgwn and the Gwynedd origin-legend: 'Mailcunus ... regnabat' (his dates apparently being 534-549; note the imperfect tense). We must presume that our author's synchronisations led him to believe that Ida, Maelgwn, and all these poets were contemporaries. We should *perhaps* be careful about ascribing to him too precise a view, for he is careful to leave an element of imprecision in his expressions of time.⁵² In the notice of the poets, the verbs *claruit* and *claruerunt* particularly interest me. They are part of the language of Late Latin annalistic writing. Could this passage have derived from our Northern annals? The balance of probability must, I think, be against it. The Latin annalists – Jerome, Prosper, Isidore – whom our author used as sources in the earlier, Roman, part of his work, used this terminology, and he borrowed into the *Historia* a couple of examples of those who *claruerunt*: Martin of Tours and St Jerome.⁵³ The Late Latin annalists included in their chronicles notices such as 'Vergilius claruit', and I think that our author must be seen consciously doing the same thing for British poetry.

His chronology, then, could go seriously awry on account of the difficulties of synchronising English and British material. He could write like a historian, interpreting his sources, and so removing them still further from the domain of readily usable evidence. But his knowledge of Welsh literary tradition – of which we have seen a concrete example in the use of the poem on Arthur – could also have distorting effects. One has been captured by the eagle eye of Kenneth Jackson:⁵⁴ no doubt because of the similarity of the written forms of their names, Eda Glynfawr, a north-British hero apparently of the later sixth century, has been identified by our author with the Northumbrian noble Eata, father of Eadberht, king of Northumbria 737-758, a distortion of a century and a half. Jackson has argued that the use of Brittonic epithets to describe English kings of the sixth and seventh centuries speaks for a source

⁵² On this question see D.N. Dumville, 'Early Welsh poetry: problems of historicity', in *The Book of Aneirin and Early Welsh Poetry*, ed. B.F. Roberts (Aberystwyth, forthcoming).

⁵³ These were drawn from Prosper, *Chronicon*, §1175 (ed. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, I.461), or Isidore, *Chronicon*, §355 (*ibid.* II.469), and (Jerome) Prosper, *Chronicon*, §1186 (*ibid.*, I.462), or Isidore, *Chronicon*, §358 (*ibid.*, II.470).

⁵⁴ 'On the northern British section', pp. 43-4.

near to the time and place of their activities.⁵⁵ 'They could scarcely have been invented long after the time of their originals', he says. I should argue for the reverse: that the existence of the epithet implies a story about the character in question, and the use of the epithets in the *Historia* suggests our author's acquaintance with that item in the Welsh literary tradition. I submit that the mistaken identification of Eda and Eata, with the addition of the epithet in a standard formula (*Eatan ... ipse est Eata Glinmaur*), is precisely the proof required for my proposition. And to say that nicknames could not be invented (or, indeed, changed) long after the time of the character in question seems to me to defy the evidence of the genealogies (and, I daresay, of the Triads).

All this leads us to the question of the date of the source or sources used by our author. The matter turns essentially on the forms of three Welsh words – *atbret*, *Neirin*, *Cunedag* – to all of which Professor Jackson assigns a date much earlier than that of our author. I think that these are easily disposed of. Jackson assigns the first to the seventh century, because of the absence of vowel-affection. In a footnote to the same article, however, he rightly observes that this absence might be purely orthographic.⁵⁶ In 1953, in fact, he gave us examples of such absence in tenth-century sources.⁵⁷ *Neirin* he describes as 'very archaic';⁵⁸ but Ifor Williams⁵⁹ and Rachel Bromwich⁶⁰ have both taken this to be a standard Old Welsh form which develops into *Aneirin* in Middle Welsh. If I read his *Grammar* aright, Simon Evans would be of the same view.⁶¹ Certainly I can find no evidence to support the idea that this is an exclusively archaic Old Welsh form. Finally, *Cunedag*: Jackson says not later than about 750, and very probably earlier.⁶² Again, there is the general argument from orthography to oppose to this; but, in addition, this, the last example of the retention of the -g, is little later than the first example of its loss – *Cinda* in the

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38 and n.1.

⁵⁷ *Language and History*, pp. 606-7.

⁵⁸ 'On the northern British section', p. 47, n. 3.

⁵⁹ *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff, 1972), p. 76, reprinting a paper first read in 1950.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43, n. [7].

⁶¹ D. Simon Evans, *A Grammar of Middle Welsh* (Dublin, 1964), p. 12.

⁶² 'On the northern British section', p. 30. For a different emphasis, see *Language and History*, p. 458.

Chad-2 memorandum, allegedly of the late eighth century.⁶³ I hardly think that the margin is sufficient to enable us to say that our author's orthographic usage could not extend to (sporadic) retention of the -g.

In any case, I should not like to assert that any of these three words occurred in the annals used by our author; they would be likely, with the possible exception of *edfryd*, to derive from his knowledge of the Welsh literary tradition and need not therefore have been before him in a written source.

What, in general, can we conclude about the value of the annals which he used? For the seventh century, or part of it, they are likely enough to have been a contemporary record, although this requires further investigation unbiased by attitudes to the *Historia Brittonum*. Certainly in eighth-century Strathclyde annals were being kept which extended back into the seventh, and perhaps later sixth, century. But if we accept Molly Miller's attractive suggestion that whoever compiled the brief mnemonic series of entries (now preserved in *Annales Cambrie*), which deals with the heroic age of the late sixth-century North, was working on the basis of much knowledge rather than much ignorance of the period,⁶⁴ we may be sure that in their present form they constitute a retrospective record for that period. *Annales Cambrie* may perhaps for the seventh and eighth centuries be a reliable, even a contemporary, record – as far as their very brief entries go. But we must adjust to the fact the *Historia Brittonum* is not even a reliable – much less a contemporary – witness to the history of seventh- and sixth-century Britain. I cannot point to any item in it, other than material deriving from English sources already known, which is not open to serious question.

I have spent a great deal of time on the unpleasant task of debunking the work of an author with whom, over the years, I have come to feel a great deal of sympathy. This task I feel to be greatly necessary, since so much credence has, in the past generation, been given to his reconstruction (for that is what it is) of early north-British history; in particular, the considerable authority of

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-7. On this source see further D. Jenkins & M.E. Owen, 'The Welsh marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 5 (1983), 37-66 and 7 (1984), 91-120. There may well be grounds, however, for assigning this memorandum to a much later date.

⁶⁴ 'The commanders at Arthuret', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, N.S., 75 (1975), 96-118, at p. 117.

Kenneth Jackson has done much to reinforce the favourable view of our author's sources. And, in the past few years, there has even been a tendency to view sympathetically the *Historia's* materials for the fifth century.

Let me stress that our author's sources, for the period of the late fourth to late seventh centuries – where scholars have hoped for the preservation of authentic early materials, are almost wholly legendary (as in the case of the English story of Hengest and Horsa) or systematic (as with the Northumbrian regnal list which controls the chronology for 547-685; or the genealogies, Welsh and English; or the catalogue-poem on Arthur; or the hagiographical material about Garmon and Cadell, Garmon and Gwrtheyrn, and about Patrick) or folkloristic (as with the '*dinnshenchas*' of Dinas Emrys). In short, none of this can be taken at face-value, and little of it can be related to the period with which it purports to deal. In an ostensibly 'historical' source, we already see all the techniques of professional mediaeval Celtic scholarship being employed: hagiography; origin-legend; synchronisation; battle-catalogues; systematic pedigrees. We must turn to a later period to reap the value of our man's work, an invaluable source for Welsh intellectual history.

Much earlier, I stated what I thought his intentions to be, and where useful parallels could be found. Certainly I consider him to have made an intelligent attempt at a history of his countrymen from their origins down to the effective conclusion of the north-British wars at the end of the seventh century. By the standards of his day, he had performed a very difficult task – given the paucity and uneven quality of his materials – rather competently and in an up-to-date fashion. The synchronising history was not an easy genre to apply for the first time; I think that we may be fairly certain that his was the first Welsh attempt.⁶⁵ How effectively his successors felt him to have performed is amply demonstrated by the great amount of attention which they paid to his work, by the fact that it was not superseded until the twelfth or thirteenth century, by the stamp which it left on the mind of Geoffrey of Monmouth (whose historiography, if I may call it that, controlled Welsh historical thought until modern times), by its use by all the important Anglo-Norman historians, by its attribution in the twelfth century to 'Gildas Sapiens', and by its continuing circu-

⁶⁵ Cf. n.18 above; for aspects of the author's intellectual context see Sims-Williams, 'Some functions' (n. 25 above).

lation in England until the end of the middle ages. If brief, our author's work was nonetheless highly influential.

What does his work tell us of the milieu from which he emerged, and how does this tie in with other evidence for the period? I cannot write at length here on the evidence about the author himself.⁶⁶ But I conclude that he was a cleric, probably from the border-regions of southeastern Wales but working in Merfyn Frych's Gwynedd, perhaps even at his court. He may have been employed as an interpreter, in addition to his religious duties. And this brings me to my main point, his multilingualism. Apart from his native Welsh, and his natural and flowing – if *not* fluent – Latin, he seems to have had a good command of Old English, and there is just a suspicion of evidence that he may have known some Old Irish. He was, then, open to international influences, some of which I have already mentioned. But he was also a Welshman, sympathetic to and no doubt fairly knowledgeable in the Welsh learned traditions of his day. We know all too little about the organisation of the native learned orders in pre-Norman Wales, and of the relations of secular and ecclesiastical within those orders. We cannot therefore say if our author would have had any professional training in genealogy, place-lore, vernacular poetry, or hagiography. We can merely observe his work, and make our own deductions. My guess would be that he was fairly heavily dependent for his knowledge on written sources. He would have a certain amount of knowledge of native learning and traditional lore, as would any member of the aristocracy, but he would have to ask for specialist sources such as genealogies, and could not himself offer the repertoire of a professional.

He is nonetheless our earliest coherent and datable witness to the development of Welsh literature, and the value of his work to the historians of both oral and written literature *and* of professional antiquarian activity (with its many social implications) is immense. The Arthurian legend is an obvious consideration. Its development has been very thoroughly discussed and I shall not dwell on it here.⁶⁷ I should simply make two points. By 829/30, a battle-catalogue poem was available in written form, and the name

⁶⁶ A full study will appear in volume 8 of my edition: *The Historia Brittonum*, ed. David N. Dumville (10 vols, Cambridge, 1985-). Cf. also my *England and the Celtic World in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (O'Donnell Lectures: publication forthcoming).

⁶⁷ The classic study remains that of T. Jones, 'The early evolution of the legend of Arthur', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 8 (1964), 3-21; cf. also Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur'.

of Arthur had taken sufficient hold on the keepers of place-lore (including natural marvels) that two episodes among the *mirabilia* which form the concluding portion of the *Historia* depend on knowledge of his exploits – his hunting of Twrch Trwyd and his killing of his son Amr.⁶⁸ I might add that the *mirabilia* (or at any rate the bulk of them) constitute a possible candidate for derivation from a pre-existing written source which was bodily incorporated by our author.⁶⁹

We see the development of a learned etymological explanation for the name of Britain and the Britons. It is *possible* that our work provides its first expression, although that is made unlikely by the amount of detail about the eponym *Britto* or *Brutus*, and by the author's statement that he had *found* two explanations of the name.

The *Historia* presents our only explicit evidence that hagiography was practised as a genre in ninth- (and indeed eighth-) century Wales, as it was in Brittany and had long been in Ireland. He draws on what he calls the *Liber Beati Germani*, arguably written during the reign of Cadell ab Brochfael (*ob.* 808) of Powys. And he inserts among the *mirabilia* a miraculous episode from a Life of St Illtud, one which is paralleled in the extant eleventh- or twelfth-century Life.⁷⁰ Another episode, describing a miraculous tomb in Ceredigion, is probably another of our author's insertions, and looks very much as if it too may derive from a hagiographic source. (It is repeated centuries later by Giraldus Cambrensis.)⁷¹

The Life of Garmon appears to have been a peculiarly characteristic piece of Celtic hagiography, and I think that we may conclude from this that the practice of hagiography was widespread in Wales by *ca* 800. This should, I think, give an impetus to the critical study of the surviving *uitae* of *ca* 1100,⁷² to see how ideas of the saints, and the claims of their churches, developed during this three-hundred-year period.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting that both episodes belong to eastern Wales (Buellet, Erging). On Twrch Trwyd, see Sims-Williams, 'The evidence' (n.19 above), p. 239.

⁶⁹ This tentative conclusion depends on analysis of the evidence of Welsh language-forms in the *mirabilia*-section of the *Historia*: see K. H. Jackson, *apud* Dumville, *The Historia Brittonum*, vol. 10.

⁷⁰ *Vita Sancti Illuti* § 22: ed. & transl. A. W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff, 1944), pp. 224-7.

⁷¹ *Itinerarium Kambrie*, II.3 (*ad fin.*).

⁷² Most of these have been edited and translated (if imperfectly) by Wade-Evans, *Vitae*. Cf. Michael Lapidge & R. Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature 400-1200* (Dublin, 1985), nos 32, 35, 37, 38, 56, 90-117, for a systematic listing of all known Cambro-Latin *uitae sanctorum*.

The *Historia* is important, too, in that it shows us a folktale-type of story, though used in the context of 'dinnshenchas', about the boy-seer Emrys. This is a landmark of importance in the legend of Merlin; again, given the extent of published discussion, I shall not pursue the matter here.⁷³

I wonder how important our author's witness is for the development of Welsh legend and systematic pedigree-work on the north-British heroic age. He knows of the poets, including at least one of whom we do not otherwise hear; there is at least a suggestion in his words that the King Eudeyrn whom he mentions was known to him from a poem, or poems, attributed to Talhaearn.⁷⁴

The passage briefly relating the Gwynedd origin-legend – which may have been the creation of the genealogists for the newly established Second Dynasty – was fairly certainly drawn not from the north-British annals but from some other source. It reads like commentary on an entry about Maelgwn. From its wording and its discrepancies as compared with other sources we can learn much about the development of this origin-legend and of the pedigrees of the kings of Gwynedd.⁷⁵

The account of the Lindisfarne confederacy of the four kings led by Urien, and ascribed by our author to the reign of Theodric of Bernicia (585-592) – although heaven only knows if that is an accurate synchronism⁷⁶ – seems to offer a little more than we might expect from a bare annalistic recital. Did our author know another poem ascribed to Taliesin which gave more detail than those which we know?⁷⁷ Or did he have access to the sort of ideas now embodied in the Llywarch Hen cycle?⁷⁸

The story of Cadafael of Gwynedd, alluded to in the Triads, is unlikely, at least in part, to have derived from the annals; certainly the pun on his name seems unlikely to have done. It would appear

⁷³ See A. O. H. Jarman, *The Legend of Merlin* (Cardiff, 1960), for a brief but lucid introduction; cf. Bromwich, *Trioedd*, pp. 469-74, 559-60.

⁷⁴ M. Miller, 'Historicity and the Pedigrees of the Northcountrymen', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 26 (1974-6), 255-80, at p. 272.

⁷⁵ Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain', pp. 181-3; M. Miller, 'Date-guessing and pedigrees', *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975/6), 96-109; Miller, 'The foundation-legend' (n. 44 above).

⁷⁶ I discuss this question in detail in a forthcoming paper, 'Some notes on the treatment of Northumbrian history 547-616 in the *Historia Brittonum*'.

⁷⁷ For the corpus currently attributed to him, with however much uncertainty, see Ifor Williams & J. E. C. Williams (edd.), *The Poems of Taliesin* (Dublin, 1968).

⁷⁸ For this see *The Poetry of Llywarch Hen*, ed. & transl. Patrick K. Ford (Berkeley, Cal., 1974). Cf. Bromwich, *Trioedd*, p. 70.

that the opprobrious story about him was already in circulation in our author's time.⁷⁹

Here, then, are some indications – however vague – of the vernacular literary sources available to our author. They do not amount to a great deal, and we can hardly view him as a great repository of national literary tradition.

We must be grateful, however, for this very important, rare, early glimpse of Welsh literary activity. There is still a good deal of work which can be done on this material. For me, one of the most important points is the unobtrusive but quite certain importance which our text gives to Magnus Maximus, reflecting his commanding position in the national origin-legend. This has many ramifications which require to be worked out in detail.⁸⁰

The *Historia Brittonum* is also a source for the general cultural history of the time. It fits in an interesting way into the broad pattern of Anglo-Welsh relationships in the approximate period 750 to 950.⁸¹ Possible connexions with Ireland I have already briefly sketched in part; we know that early mediaeval Continental sources were reaching Wales in the ninth century – we can see the use of at least one in our text;⁸² but the most important for present purposes (and the only ones on which I have space to dwell) are cultural relations with England. As far as we can make out, these were practically non-existent before the Easter-controversy was resolved in the later eighth century. The inevitable result of that resolution was the opening of Wales to more outside influences. (It is at precisely this period that annals begin to be kept at St Davids, into which Irish and north-British sources were incorporated.)⁸³ The *Historia Brittonum* is part of, and the most substantial evidence for, the development of English cultural influence in Wales. The

⁷⁹ K. Jackson, 'Brittonica', *The Journal of Celtic Studies* 1 (1949/50), 69-79, at p. 69, and 'On the northern British section', pp. 38-9; Bromwich, *Trioedd*, pp. 289-90, 546.

⁸⁰ For a beginning, see Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain', pp. 179-81. See also J. F. Matthews, 'Macsen, Maximus, and Constantine', *Welsh History Review* 11 (1982/3), 431-48; and M. G. Jarrett, 'Magnus Maximus and the end of Roman Britain', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1983), 22-35.

⁸¹ On this subject see my *England and the Celtic World* (n. 66 above).

⁸² *Genealogiae gentium*: see W. Goffart, 'The supposedly "Frankish" table of nations: an edition and study', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 17 (1983), 98-130. The same conclusion might also be drawn from the study both of manuscripts from ninth-century Wales and of Asser's Life of King Alfred.

⁸³ Hughes, *Celtic Britain*, chapters 5 and 6.

alphabet of Nemnius, part of a manuscript dated to the year 817, is an adaptation of the English runic futhorc with Welsh names; it is alleged by the text that this was done as part of a dispute between an English and a Welsh scholar.⁸⁴ For the date of this Welsh runic alphabet we have no precise information, but the half-century 768x817 is hardly likely to be wide of the mark. Our text, the *Historia Brittonum*, dates from 829/30.⁸⁵ About 840, there were Welsh monks apparently in residence at Lindisfarne;⁸⁶ their presence – or that of others like them – could help to explain our author's acquisition of Northumbrian materials. Finally, if the charters for the ninth century in the Book of Llandaf be in any sense trustworthy evidence, English personal nomenclature seems to have been becoming popular in Wales – at any rate in the south-east.⁸⁷ I think that the name 'Edwin' was borrowed at the latest in the ninth century (and, incidentally, that when Hywel Dda called his son Edwin, he was giving him an acceptable Welsh name!).⁸⁸

Our author was very heavily dependent on English materials. Indeed, one might almost say that he had more English than Welsh sources. His account of the fifth to seventh centuries is controlled by three major English sources and a number of minor ones. In this and in his knowledge of Old English, we may see him as a representative of a new trend in Welsh culture, which was to be a feature of the ninth and tenth centuries. The relationship developed during the ninth century, being made closer, no doubt, by the viking-wars and by political cooperation (perhaps inaugurated by Offa of Mercia in the late eighth century⁸⁹ but most effectively practised by the West Saxon kings Alfred and Edward in the late ninth and early tenth). The work of Asser inaugurates a new phase, where the political dominance of Wessex is matched by a Welsh cultural superiority lasting for a century – a period in which

⁸⁴ Dumville, "'Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*', pp. 90-2, and the references cited there.

⁸⁵ Dumville, 'Some aspects of the chronology', pp. 439-40.

⁸⁶ Jackson, *Language and History*, p. 59.

⁸⁷ Cf. Wendy Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* (Aberystwyth, 1979), p. 145, on the distribution of English names in the charters of *Liber Landauensis*. 'Chad 3' and 'Chad 4', Welsh charters of *saec. ix/x* in the Lichfield Gospels, have as a witness an ecclesiastic called *Cutulf*, which I take to be Old English Cuthwulf – not a very common Welsh name!

⁸⁸ In saying this I dissent from the frequently expressed opinion that this was an aspect of Hywel's pro-English toadying: see further D. P. Kirby, 'Hywel Dda: anglophil?', *Welsh History Review* 8 (1976/7), 1-13.

⁸⁹ But, on the evidence of recent archaeological work on Offa's Dyke, this now seems increasingly unlikely.

Wales (and Brittany and Cornwall) contributed a great deal to the cause of the revival of English learning (and ecclesiastical discipline).⁹⁰ Our author, in the early ninth century, was writing in a period of English cultural dominance; it is interesting that, just over a century later, a Welsh revision of his work was transmitted to England where the revival of learning was under way and where his History was rewritten in a less eccentric style to give us what is known now as the 'Vatican recension' of the *Historia Brittonum*.⁹¹

I do not propose to prolong this paper by considering at length the textual history of the work; yet this does give us a good deal of evidence for its later study in Wales, certainly up to and including the eleventh century; in Ireland, in the tenth and eleventh centuries; in England from the tenth century to the end of the middle ages, and in Normandy until the separation from England in the thirteenth century; in Brittany in the eleventh century at least; in the Low Countries in the twelfth; and elsewhere.⁹² All this provides good historical evidence of cultural contacts.

The *Historia Brittonum* is certainly not one of the outstanding works of historical literature, but it does occupy an important place in Welsh history and culture, and is a major element in the developing picture of British historiography in the middle ages. If it does not serve to lighten the darkness of the fifth to seventh centuries, it nonetheless offers many unexplored possibilities when we come to consider the history and culture of the eighth and ninth centuries.⁹³

⁹⁰ On all this, see Dumville, *England and the Celtic World*.

⁹¹ See Dumville, *The Historia Brittonum*, vol. 3.

⁹² For the principal versions, see the convenient list given by Lapidge & Sharpe, *A Bibliography*, pp. 42-5 (nos 127-34). All these are to be published separately by Dumville, *The Historia Brittonum*.

⁹³ This paper was first written for delivery to a Staff Colloquium of the Departments of Welsh in the University of Wales, held at Lampeter in July 1976. I owe the invitation to speak, and much kind hospitality, to Professor D. Simon Evans. For eventual publication this paper has been revised and updated but not substantially altered.