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CHAPTER THREE

400–800: Dinas Powys, Catraeth and Llantwit Major

The demise of the Roman Empire has been mourned to excess. Its essence was violence and its accomplishments were fundamentally second-rate. Its achievements in the world of science and technology were few; what need was there for new inventions in a society which had an abundance of slaves? Its literature and fine arts were a pale reflection of the splendours of classical Athens. As Mortimer Wheeler, among the most distinguished of the interpreters of the Empire, put it: 'I suffered from a surfeit of things Roman. I felt disgusted by the mechanistic quality of their art and by the nearness of their civilization at all times to cruelty and corruption.'

Yet those who delight in empire see the collapse of Roman power in the west as ushering in the 'Dark Ages' – in Britain and in Wales more than anywhere. With the vast contraction in the number of archaeological sites and artefacts, it appeared that civilization had yielded to barbarism. With the evidence of the classical authors ceasing, historians were deprived of a coherent chronicle of events. With the long sunset came an age of myth and fantasy almost devoid of historical certainties. There has been a healthy reaction against the more extreme assertions concerning the darkness of the 'Dark Ages' and the time has come to abandon the term. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that western Europe experienced great changes in the centuries following the collapse of Roman power. It is believed that the economy which had developed under the Empire survived to a considerable extent for a century or more after its collapse, but by 650, partly because of the sweeping victories of Islam, that economy was stone-dead and the trade, the industries, the cities and the extensive literacy which had been dependent upon it had vanished. With them vanished the ethos which had sprung from the Greeks and which had been spread by the Romans. That ethos was resuscitated during the Renaissance and became the basis

of the culture of modern Europe; in consequence, the Roman period can appear less alien than does the period which followed it, and some of the vilification suffered by that period is the result of an inability to understand and appreciate it.

The years 400–600 are wholly central to the history of Wales and Britain. That was the era when Britain came to be divided into a Brythonic west, a Teutonic east and a Gaelic north, and when the nations of the Welsh, the English and the Scots crystallized. It was the era which saw the establishment of the dynasties of the main kingdoms of Wales and the transformation of Brythonic into a language which can be recognized as Welsh. It was also the age when Christianity so pervaded Wales that most of its parishes came to bear the names of the glorious army of the saints. Unfortunately, these seminal changes are cloaked in the deepest obscurity. In this generation, valiant attempts have been made to penetrate the obscurity, and studies have been published which prove the ability of historians and archaeologists to coax meaning out of the most intractable evidence. And it is its intractability rather than its scarcity which is the main feature of the evidence. Although not plentiful, there is more written material relating directly to Wales in the two hundred years from 400 to 600 than there is for the previous two centuries or, indeed, for the following two centuries. But because the period 400–600 is so central, the desire to come to grips with it is greater than the desire to come to grips with the earlier and the later periods; greater too is the opportunity to offer varying interpretations of it and to debate them incessantly. Indeed, the years 400–600 have become a tournament for scholars, with each successive contributor to the debate eager to unhorse his predecessor.

It is impossible to appreciate these debates without grasping the nature of the evidence. The most influential document is *De Excidio Britanniae* (Concerning the Fall of Britain), which was written by the monk Gildas (sometime between 500 and 550. There are some 25,000 words in the *De Excidio* and, had Gildas written in the manner of the classical historians, his book would have been a source of magnificent import. But Gildas is a splendid example of the irate cleric and what he offers is a sermon reviling his contemporaries, the kings of Britain, rather than a chronicle of his age. His Latin is characterized by a verbose opaqueness and he writes in a cryptic style with a host of biblical quotations. The traditional story of the coming of the Saxons is that of Gildas: he interpreted their success as the vengeance of God upon the Britons for

their sins, and this interpretation, which was repeated by Bede, became an influential weapon in justifying the power of the English.

Apart from the work of Gildas, other contemporary writings having a bearing upon events in Britain in the period 400–600 include a few Frankish chronicles, some of the lives of the Irish saints, and *The Life of St Samson*, the only example of Welsh hagiography written in the 'Age of Saints'. In addition, there is the earliest Welsh literature, the poems of Taliesin and Aneirin; the oldest extant copies of the poems date from the generation after 1250, but Ifor Williams's theory that the core of their work was composed around 600 is broadly accepted. Inscribed stones form the most important element in the non-documentary material; there are in Wales 139 stones bearing inscriptions carved in the quarter millennium after the fall of the Empire. Of the few sites occupied in that period that have been excavated, Dinas Powys and Dinas Emrys have yielded exciting finds. There is nothing in Wales comparable with the rich objects found in the Saxon graves of southern and eastern England, where the bodies are those of pagans and are accompanied by objects intended to comfort the deceased in the afterworld. Archaeologists have cause to bemoan the Christianity of the Welsh.

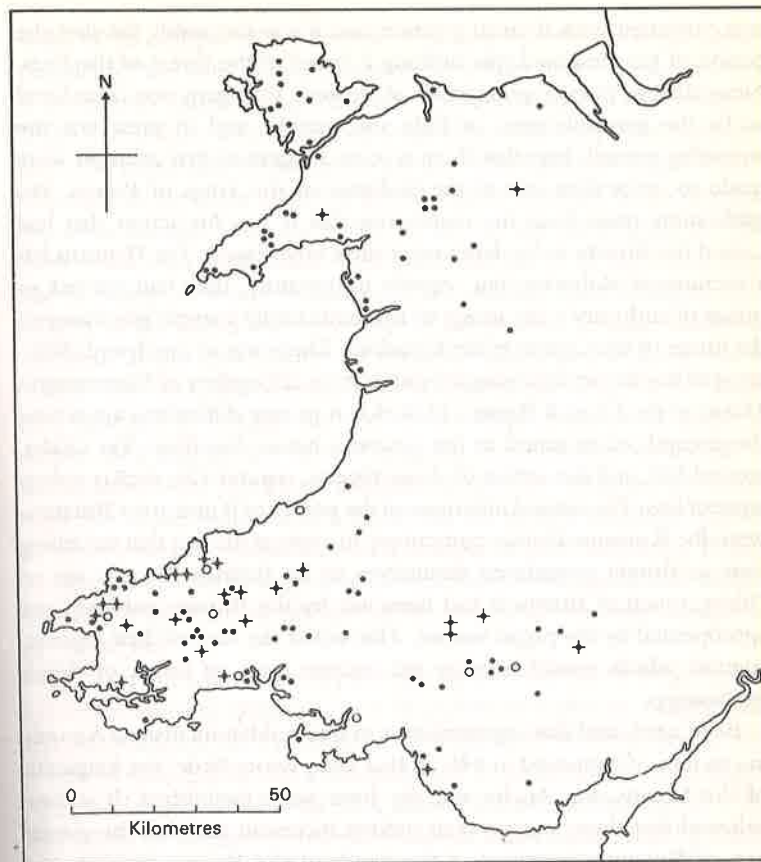
This is almost the totality of the evidence which has survived from the period 400 to 600, but in succeeding centuries further documentary evidence was produced. About 730 Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English*, a magnificent work, far-reaching in its influence but marred by a deep prejudice against the Welsh. In about 890, the original version of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was compiled; it was based upon annals written from 635 onwards and it provides a narrative of the beginnings of the English kingdoms. Some time around 960, a collection was made – probably at St David's – of a variety of documents, pedigrees and annals. It is believed that the pedigrees were drawn up at the request of Owain ap Hywel Dda and they are central to an understanding of the early history of the Welsh kingdoms. The annals contain brief notes on 151 of the years between 447 and 954 and include about twenty-five sentences dealing with the period 447–600. These are the *Annales Cambriae*; they were based on various sources, including the chronicles of the Irish and the notes occasionally written on the Pascal Tables of the monastery of St David's. Bound with the pedigrees and the annals is a version of the jumble of stories to which the title *Historia Brittonum* (History of the Britons) was given in around 1150. At that time they were ascribed to Nennius, and it is believed that the kernel of the

material was gathered together in about 830. Nennius's work contains the story of Cunedda and his sons; details are given of Vortigern and Germanus of Auxerre (the Garmon of Welsh tradition); Arthur is mentioned and Brutus is described as the ancestor of the Welsh. The *Historia* is the only source for most of these matters but, where it is possible to prove the correctness of Nennius's material, it is clear that his ignorance was monumental.

It is difficult to know what to do with such intractable material. On the one hand, it has been argued that it is impossible to provide a coherent account of what happened in Britain between 400 and 600; on the other, there is the bold study of John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, in which the author extracts from the evidence as much meaning as possible; he was rewarded for his labours by a thirty-three page review in small print in *Studia Celtica* in which he is accused of being mistaken on a heroic scale. The work of most specialists lies somewhere in between these two extremes; their example will be followed here in an attempt to provide a plausible narrative without overtaxing the evidence.

It would appear that the collapse of Roman power, although a disaster to some, was an opportunity to others. Among the inhabitants of the *civitates* of Britannia, there were those to whom the disappearance of the jurisdiction of Rome offered the chance to take power into their own hands. On the basis of the fragile evidence, it may be assumed that there was tension between those who sought the restoration of imperial authority and those prepared to tread the path of independence. The efforts of the men of the *civitates* enjoyed a measure of success. The cities did not suddenly disappear: when Germanus visited one of them in 429 – Verulam, probably – the civic officers were still attending to their duties. But in seizing power it is unlikely that the leaders of the *civitates* were undertaking a role that was wholly congenial to them. They had long since been imbued with the notion that sovereignty belonged elsewhere, and as the Romans, within regions where their authority was undisputed, had prohibited civilians from bearing arms, military traditions had withered among the men of south-eastern Britain. The inhabitants of the less Romanized regions – those of Wales and the northern marches of Britannia – were less hesitant and within a few decades of the demise of the Empire it would appear that authority had been seized by the men of the periphery.

Among them was Vortigern (the Gwrtheyrn of Welsh tradition). It would seem that Vortigern was a native of the borders of Wales and he



Based upon V. E. Nash-Williams, 1950

- + Stone bearing a bilingual inscription – Latin and Ogam
- o Stone bearing an Ogam inscription
- Stone bearing a Latin inscription

The distribution of inscribed stones of the period 400 to 700

appears in the genealogies as an ancestor of the kings of Powys. Nennius has a considerable amount to say about him but he is not mentioned by Gildas. If the core of the traditions concerning Vortigern is accepted – including the story that it was he who yielded land to German mercenary soldiers in return for help against the Picts – it is reasonable to assume that he had a measure of authority throughout Britannia sometime between the years 420 and 450. Vortigern's agreement with the Germans

was consistent with Roman practice, and it was successful, for after the period of his presumed rule nothing is heard of the threat of the Picts. Nevertheless, to later generations of Britons, Vortigern was considered to be the personification of folly and perfidy, and so great was the antipathy towards him that there is some suggestion that attempts were made to write him out of the pedigree of the kings of Powys. His vilification arose from the conviction that it was his action that had caused the Britons to be deprived of their inheritance. The Romans left a vacuum of authority; but, equally importantly, they had created an image of authority – the image of Britannia under a single government, the image of the Crown of the Kingdom. There was so much embellishment of this theme following the publication of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* c.1136 that it is now difficult to appreciate the strength of its appeal in the centuries before Geoffrey. Yet Gildas, around 540, and the author of *Armes Prydein*, around 929, display a deep sense of loss. The natural inheritors of the power of Rome over Britannia were the Romano-British, particularly in view of the fact that the ruling class in Britain considered themselves to be Roman. By the age of Gildas, much of Britannia had been lost by the Britons and had been appropriated by the pagan Saxons. This was at the root of their anguish, anguish which would become the motive force of much of Welsh mythology.

Bede attributed that appropriation to one sudden incursion. According to him, it happened in 446; in that year, wrote Bede, the kingdoms of the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes were established. It is now believed that there was no such sudden incursion and that the greater part of Britannia remained in the hands of the Britons for at least a century after the fall of the Empire. Nora Chadwick described that century as one during which it was possible to travel from Edinburgh to Cornwall in the assurance that Brythonic would be understood along the whole of the journey, and as a period when Brythonic kingdoms were paramount in the island.

Those kingdoms varied in their origins, but the genealogical lists compiled about 960 suggest that most of them could claim some degree of association with the Roman order. It should be remembered that it is only the pedigrees of successful royal houses that have survived. The inscribed stones bear the names of a number of men who had probably been powerful in their localities, but they cannot be recognized in any king-lists. It is probable that numerous small kingdoms emerged in the

wake of the collapse of the Empire. This may be reflected in the *cantrefi* (hundreds), the units of local government of later times. Although there is no definite information relating to the boundaries of the *cantrefi* of Wales for at least seven hundred years after 400, they may well date from the immediate post-Roman period. The *Mabinogi* begins with a reference to the seven *cantrefi* of Dyfed and the Laws of Wales mention the seven bishops' houses of Dyfed. In Ireland, the early kingdom – the *tuath* – was very small; there were ninety-seven in all and every *tuath* had its bishop. It would be unwise to rely heavily upon evidence from Ireland; as the island was never part of the Roman Empire, there was no break in the development of its native institutions as there was in Wales. The old Celtic system, with its semi-divine ruler, the *ri* (Welsh *rhi*), survived in Ireland, but the Welsh adopted the word *brenin* to denote their less archaic form of kingship. Nevertheless, the extent of the territory of the first kings of Wales was probably broadly comparable with that of the *tuath*, and it is likely that the earliest kingdoms known to history were a combination of a number of such territories. It may be assumed that the stronger kings annexed the territories of their weaker neighbours and that the lineages of the victors are the only lineages to have survived.

Of these lineages, the most powerful by 540 was that of Maglocunus, a ruler portrayed by Gildas as a man of impressive sinfulness. Maglocunus was the Maelgwn Fawr or Maelgwn Gwynedd of Welsh tradition. The pedigrees state that he was a descendant of Cunedda who, according to Nennius, came to Gwynedd from among the Men of the North – the inhabitants of southern Scotland. Cunedda is not mentioned by Gildas and the first surviving reference to him is four hundred years later than his alleged lifetime. The story of Cunedda may be a myth invented in about 800 when Merfyn ap Gwriad, also probably of the lineage of the Men of the North, became king of Gwynedd. Nevertheless, the Welsh treasured traditions relating to the northern kingdoms, in particular the kingdom of the Votadini (Gododdin) on the banks of the river Forth. Aneirin, the poet of the Votadini, claimed that men from Gwynedd joined the army of the king of the Votadini in its attack upon Catterick around 600, and a brooch in the same style as the brooches of the Forth valley has been discovered at Pant-y-saer in Anglesey. These are considerations which make it difficult not to give some credence to Nennius's account. He states that Cunedda, the *atavus* of Maelgwn Gwynedd, came with eight sons and one grandson from Manaw Gododdin and

drove the Irish out of Gwynedd, an event which occurred 146 years before the reign of Maelgwn.

Historians have derived much innocent pleasure from the 146 years and the word *atavus*. One possible interpretation is that Cunedda came to Gwynedd between 380 and 400; if so, it would be reasonable to link his coming with the vacuum of authority created when Magnus Maximus denuded Segontium of its garrison in 383. The present tendency, however, is to favour a year around 440 as the date of the migration, and it has been argued that it occurred under the aegis of Vortigern. According to the pedigrees, Cunedda's grandfather was Padarn Beisrudd (Paternus of the red cloak), an epithet which suggests that he had worn the cloak of a Roman officer. If Cunedda were a contemporary of Vortigern, his grandfather would have been in his prime around 383, and it is possible that he had been invested with his cloak as part of the efforts of Magnus Maximus to secure the borders of Britannia before departing with his army. Cunedda would certainly have been accompanied by a band of warriors, but it is unlikely that the story of his sons – Ceredig, Ederm and the others – and the kingdoms they founded – Ceredigion, Edeirnion and so on – is trustworthy. Early Welsh literature contains a wealth of stories seeking to explain place-names, and doubtless the story is propaganda aimed at justifying the right of Cunedda's descendants to territories beyond the borders of the original kingdom of Gwynedd. That kingdom probably consisted of the banks of the Menai Strait and the coast over towards the estuary of the river Conwy, the foundations upon which Cunedda's descendants created a more extensive realm. There is evidence besides that of Nennius concerning the success of the campaign against the invaders from Ireland. It is possible that colonies of Irish continued to exist in Gwynedd up to the time of Maelgwn Fawr – a memory of them remains in place-names such as Llŷn and Dinllaen – but there is a determinedly Brythonic, and indeed Roman, air to early Gwynedd.

It was quite otherwise in south-west Wales, for the kingdom of Dyfed was of Irish origin. There are in Dyfed twenty inscribed stones bearing letters in ogam, the script of the Irish. This is one of the factors which led John Rhys to argue that it was the Q-Celts who were the first to colonize Britain and that the western peninsulas were not Brittonicized (or P-Celticized) until about AD 500. This theory is no longer accepted, but the ogam stones are an indication of considerable Irish colonization in Dyfed in the last decades of the Empire and in the immediate post-

Roman period. One of the legends of the Irish mentions the coming of the tribe of the Deisi to Wales, an event which can probably be dated to the years between 350 and 400. In Castellldwyran near Narberth there is a stone bearing the name Voteporix (Gwrthefyr) in both Latin and ogam; it is a memorial to the man described by Gildas in his least offensive vein as *tyrannus Demetarum*. On his stone he is given the title *Protictoris*, which suggests that one of his ancestors was a member of the retinue of an emperor and that the title had become hereditary. The name of Magnus Maximus occurs in his pedigree; it is possible that it was Magnus who permitted the migration of the Deisi to Dyfed and that one of Voteporix's forefathers had been in his service. Traditions relating to Brychan, the eponymous founder of the kingdom of Brycheiniog, also have an Irish context. There are six ogam stones in Brycheiniog, part of the large body of evidence relating to the ancient routes linking west Wales with the Usk valley.

The name 'Powys' probably comes from the word 'pagus'; both therefore are cognate with the word 'pagan'. It is believed that the nucleus of the kingdom of Powys was the *pagus* or the hinterland of the territory of the Cornovii and that Powys expanded to include not only that territory – the rich lands of the middle Severn valley – but also the lands between the upper reaches of the rivers Wye and Dee. According to tradition, Vortigern was the founder of the royal house of Gwrtheyrnion in southern Powys, but the column erected near Llangollen about 825 in memory of King Eliseg states that Gwrtheyrn was also the founder of the main line and that his wife was the daughter of Magnus Maximus.

In the south-east, the most Romanized area of Wales, the kingdoms developed from a combination of the Roman settlements and the old traditions of the Silures. Caerwent, which had come to an end as an urban settlement by 500, gave its name to Gwent, as Ariconium gave its name to Erging (Archenfield). The pedigrees state that Caradog Freichfras was the founder of the royal house of Gwent and it has been claimed that his name is evidence of a desire to commemorate a man who had been a hero among the Silures. It is probable that Caradog Freichfras arose from among the *decuriones* of Caerwent; he may therefore have been a descendant of the aristocracy which had existed among the Silures four hundred years earlier. Gwent was the district between the rivers Usk and Wye. To the north-east lay the kingdom of Erging; according to the charters copied by the compilers of *The Book of Llandaff* around 1130, it would appear that the kings of Erging, the descendants

of Erb, were the leading figures in south-east Wales in the period 500-600. To the west of Gwent lay the kingdom of Glywysing; by 600 its king was Meurig ap Tewdrig, the ancestor of a line of kings which would rule in the south-east for over five hundred years. Material in *The Book of Llandaff* provides ground for believing that Meurig and his descendants extended their power over Erging and Gwent as well as over Glywysing. It was they who created the kingdom of Morgannwg (Glamorgan), which may have been named after Morgan ab Athrwys who died about 665, although some specialists attribute the name to Morgan ab Owain who died in 974. There is little definite evidence concerning the origins of the kings of Glywysing, although it is claimed that Magnus Maximus lurks somewhere in their pedigree.

In the history or the mythology of the beginnings of the kingdoms of Wales, Magnus is a ubiquitous lurker. He also figures in stories of the saints; he appears in the early literature of Cornwall and in the traditions of the Men of the North and it is he who is the hero of the story *Breuddwyd Macsen*. So great was his appeal to the Welsh imagination and so substantial was his alleged contribution to the establishment of the early Welsh kingdoms that A. W. Wade-Evans and Martin Charlesworth suggested that he could be considered to be the father of the Welsh nation. This view was supported by Gwynfor Evans, who argued that Magnus, in acknowledging the role of the leaders of the Britons in 383, opened the way for independent political organizations to develop among the Welsh earlier than they did among most of the other nations of Europe. It was also supported by Gwyn A. Williams, perhaps because of his desire to give a neat symmetry to his interpretation of the history of Wales - that the nation came into existence during the death-throes of one empire and went out of existence during the death-throes of another. If it is accepted that a nation has an organic nature similar to that of a human being - a concept full of difficulties - then perhaps it is not over-fanciful to consider 383 as the year of the conception of the Welsh nation and to accept Magnus Maximus as the father of that nation.

And it was the conception rather than the birth of the nation which occurred in 383, for the word *Cymry* had not been adopted as the name of the nation and Wales was not its only territory. The kingdoms of southern Scotland were of the same nature as those of Wales: Strathclyde with its centre at Dunbarton Rock (Dun Breatann) in the river Clyde, Rheged with its centre possibly at Carlisle and the land of the Votadini with its centre at Edinburgh. These kingdoms have an important place

in the history of Wales, for among their inhabitants were the authors of the earliest surviving examples of literature in the Welsh language. To the south of Rheged lay the kingdom of Elmet or Elfed, which extended across the Pennines, while Devon and Cornwall constituted the kingdom of Dumnonia reigned over by King Constantine, towards whom Gildas was so impolite. There were doubtless other Brythonic kingdoms in southern and eastern Britain. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions King Nantleod, who met his death in 508, and the kings Conmael, Conidan and Farinmail, who were killed at Dyrham near Bath in 577, and the scale of the fortifications at Cadbury in Somerset prove that a powerful Brythonic ruler lived there around 550. Virtually nothing is known about these rulers; unlike the rulers of the Men of the North, they do not seem to have had close ties with the kings of Wales; thus, after their kingdoms had been overwhelmed by the English, no one in later generations had any motive for remembering them.

The most substantial evidence relating to the nature of the early Brythonic kingdoms comes from Gwynedd. Gwynedd had sufficient cohesion as a kingdom for its inhabitants to be consciously Venedotian; on the memorial stone of Cantiorix, raised at Penmachno in about 500, he is described as *Venedotis Cives* (citizen of Gwynedd). There is evidence in Gwynedd of a desire to cling to the Roman world; on the stone commemorating Melus at Llangian in Anglesey, it is noted that he is a *medicus* (doctor), and Cantiorix's stone records that he was the cousin of Maglos, the *magistratus*. The inscribed stones, together with the work of the archaeologists, prove that Wales in the centuries after the fall of the Empire was not without contact with the culture of the other regions which had been under the sway of Rome. The traditional notion that Saxon colonization in south-eastern Britain created a wedge which prevented contact between Wales and mainland Europe is a mistaken one. In prehistory, the greater part of such contact had occurred via the western sea-routes. With the collapse of the Empire, voyages along those western routes revived; indeed, it could be argued that the period of Roman rule was an unusual episode in the experience of Wales, a time when it was pulled away from its natural westerly axis. The memorial to the son of Avitorius at Penmachno states that the stone was raised during the consulate of Justinus, a man who is known to have been appointed consul in 540 by the remnant of Roman power still existing in the West. The epitaph carved for King Cadfan following his death in about 625 shows that an artist in Gwynedd was aware of the most recent

fashion in lettering, and the format of inscriptions provides evidence of links with France, northern Africa and the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The fort at Degannwy, the seat of Maelgwn Fawr, has yielded fragments of glass and pottery from the Black Sea, Athens and Bordeaux, as has Dinas Emrys, a site associated with Vortigern.

Evidence from the other Welsh kingdoms is less plentiful, although excavations at Dinas Powys in Glamorgan have proved that around 500 the fort was occupied by a chieftain who had pottery and glass at least as varied in their origins as those of Maelgwn Fawr. Similar objects have been found in about half a dozen sites known to have been occupied in the centuries immediately following the fall of the Empire. Their style indicates that the trade extended over several generations, although the sum of what has been discovered would suggest that cargoes did not arrive more than once every decade or two. The pottery and glass were probably exchanged for leather or skins, for coinage virtually vanished from Britain within a few years of the end of Roman rule. Indeed, on the basis of the archaeological evidence, it would seem that society was poorer in material terms after the fall of the Empire than it had been before the coming of the Romans. Metal-working continued, as the smithy at Dinas Powys testifies, but there is no suggestion that masterpieces similar to those of the La Tène era were created. Furthermore, no attempt was made to build anything remotely comparable with the hill-forts of the Iron Age; only half a hectare was enclosed at Dinas Powys, and at Garn Boduan, where the pre-Roman fort extends over six hectares, a fortification of about a quarter of a hectare was built within it, perhaps around 500.

It is likely therefore that in AD 500 the population of Wales was smaller than it had been in 100 BC. It has been suggested that on the eve of the Roman occupation Wales had a population of about 250,000, but as the evidence is so slight it would be unwise to make too much of the figure. Evidence relating to the economy of Wales and to the nature of the life of its inhabitants is equally slight. The portrait of the chroniclers and the poets is that of a 'heroic' society, although it should be borne in mind that the only members of that 'heroic' society were the highest class of the inhabitants – the king and his retinue. Because of the nature of the evidence, there is a tendency to give excessive prominence to the king when considering society in early Wales. A number of factors gave cohesion to that society; the king was among those factors but there were others of equal or greater importance. The 'heroic' society of the

age of Maelgwn Fawr would persist in its essentials for at least half a millennium, and a fuller discussion of its characteristics will be deferred until the narrative approaches the time of the composition of documents which can throw some light upon the society which maintained the king and the 'heroes'. It is reasonable to believe that those documents – the Welsh law-books in particular – include material which is relevant to the age of Maelgwn. They contain elements which date back to the age before the Brythonic kingdoms in England and Scotland were overwhelmed by the English.

The overwhelming of the Brythonic kingdoms is the central fact in the history of Britain in the period 400-800; it was a relatively slow process and even in 700 the English were not in secure possession of the entire territory which would eventually constitute England. It is likely that German soldiers came to Britain with Aulus Plautius in AD 43; the practice of recruiting among the Germans increased markedly in the later years of the Empire and a substantial number of the legionary veterans settled permanently in the districts in which they had served. By about 300, a Germano-Roman culture was developing in Britain, considerable evidence of which has been found in the German cemeteries situated in the vicinity of the Roman cities of eastern England. Of the various German tribes, it was the Frisians and Saxons who dwelt between the estuaries of the rivers Elbe and Rhine who provided Britain with the greater part of its migrants. Probably little attention should be given to Bede's attempt to distinguish between Angles, Saxons and Jutes. To the Britons who wrote in Latin, the migrants were *Saxones*; in Welsh, they were *Saeson*.

Although Germans were numerous in Britain before the fall of the Empire, the traditions of the English maintain that it was later invaders who established the English kingdoms of the south-east of the island. Those traditions date the beginnings of the royal house of Kent to around 450, that of Sussex to around 480 and that of Wessex to around 495. These dates can be harmonized with Nennius's story of Vortigern granting the Isle of Thanet in Kent to the English in 428, although if Gildas's account is preferred it would be necessary to suggest rather later dates. It is likely that the mercenaries cast off the sovereignty of Vortigern and that they invited more of their compatriots to join them. There is an entry in the Frankish annals which states that by the 440s Britain was in the possession of the Saxons, but that comment was probably only relevant to the extreme south-east of the island. From their footholds in

south-eastern Britain, the Saxons were well placed to plunder their British neighbours and it was probably these raids which caused the Britons to appeal to the Empire in 446 (or perhaps between 457 and 462). The appeal was ignored and in the decades after 450 the Saxons grasped the opportunity to plant small kingdoms in south-eastern Britain. Their territories were not extensive – London was not in their possession – and their attempts to extend them were frustrated by the campaigns associated with the name of Ambrosius (the Emrys Wledig of Welsh tradition). There are suggestions of rivalry between Ambrosius and Vortigern; it would appear that Ambrosius came from a more Romanized background than his rival, and his campaigns may have represented the last stand of the *civitates*.

Over the greater part of Britain the small footholds of the English may not have been seen as much of a threat. This would seem to be confirmed by the readiness of the Britons in c.476 to send soldiers to Gaul to assist the Emperor Anthemius, a magnanimous gesture to an empire on its death-bed. Up to about 480, the threat from Ireland was probably at least as great as that from mainland Europe; it has been argued that it was Irish raids upon Devon and Cornwall which caused the first wave of migration to Brittany between about 460 and 480, for the language introduced into Brittany was the Brythonic of south-western Britain rather than that of the regions threatened by the English.

The archaeological record suggests that by about 490 substantial English communities had been established, particularly in the middle Thames valley, the later nucleus of the kingdom of Wessex; it also suggests that between 500 and 550 those communities stagnated or even contracted. Excavations in the Low Countries have yielded evidence of Saxon migration from Britain in that period, archaeological evidence which accords with statements by Frankish chroniclers. This reverse migration is consistent with Gildas's reference to a great victory won by the Britons at Mons Badonicus, a battle which was fought, wrote Gildas, in the year of his birth. He was approaching his forty-fourth birthday when he wrote the *De Excidio* and thus the date of the battle hinges upon the date of Gildas's work. Mons Badonicus could have been fought at any time between 450 and 518, but there is a tendency to favour a year around 496. The fame of the battle arises from the fact that Nennius attributed the victory to Arthur. Centuries after Nennius's lifetime, Arthur was elevated to be one of the great heroes of Europe and, for an entire continent, his court was seen as the fount of chivalry. Geoffrey

of Monmouth in his *History of the Kings of Britain* portrays Arthur as a glorious hero, but the only references to him which survive from the centuries before the publication of Geoffrey's work in c.1136 are Nennius's comment, together with a few other slight allusions. Although some historians doubt whether Arthur was a historical figure at all, it is reasonable to believe that a man of that name did exist and that he was the leader of Brythonic forces, perhaps on the pattern of the *Dux Britanniarum* of the previous century. It is credible also that his forces won a victory of importance in about 496 and that he was killed – or that he vanished – in about 515, following the battle of Camlan. To say more than that would be inadmissible, and the fame of Arthur remains one of the mysteries of the history of Wales, Britain and Europe – although it may represent a desire to pay tribute to the last of the heirs of Rome to make a successful stand against the 'barbarians'.

There have been lengthy debates about the location of Mons Badonicus. It may be Badbury Rings, in which case it would represent a victory over the Saxons of Dorset; it may be near Bath, which would probably mean that it was a victory over a campaign launched by the colonists of the mid-Thames valley. Nennius states that Mons Badonicus was one of Arthur's many victories and the list of battles in the *Historia* offers a basis for believing that Arthur campaigned against all the emerging English kingdoms. Such campaigns would be consistent with the notion that he was the leader of mobile cavalymen and would also accord with the existence of Arthurian traditions in widely separated parts of Britain. Gildas states that in his day the English were not waging war upon the Britons. Nevertheless, according to tradition, it was during his lifetime that the two kingdoms which would represent the greatest threat to the Britons came into existence. In the years between 495 and 530, Cerdic, the founder of the house of Wessex, won authority over southern Hampshire, and in 547 Ida created the nucleus of the kingdom of Bernicia (Brynaich) by building the fort of Bamburgh on the coast of Northumbria. Yet these were small footholds, and it is likely that most of Britain remained under the authority of Brythonic kings at least until the death of Maelgwn Fawr in 549. On the basis of his study of river-names, Kenneth Jackson argued that it was only those areas in which there are virtually no Celtic names that were in the hands of the English by 550. Those are the areas east of a line from Scarborough to Southampton. If his argument is correct (it should be noted that not all experts accept it), the English in 550 were still a considerable distance

away from those keys to mastery over southern Britain – the two stretches of lowland which extend to the estuaries of the rivers Dee and Severn and which divide the Highland Zone into three.

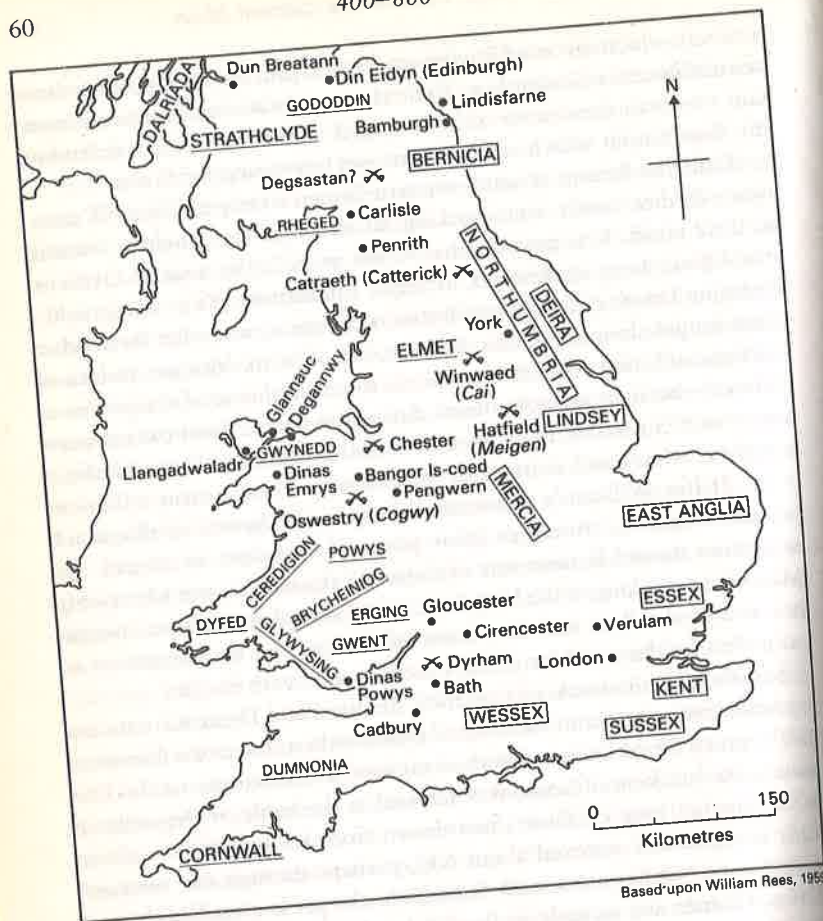
The time of decision was the century 550 to 650. Those were the years when the English won supremacy over the greater part of southern Britain. It would appear that the Britons offered only a feeble resistance to the campaigns of the rulers of Wessex which started about 550. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes a series of their victories, including the capture of Salisbury in 552 and of Aylesbury in 571, victories which (such was the rapacity of the descendants of Cerdic) included triumphs over their fellow-English as well as over the Britons. Among their victories was that of 577 at Dyrham, twelve kilometres from Bristol, a battle in which they killed three kings and captured Bath, Cirencester and Gloucester. Thus the men of Wessex had reached the coast of the Severn Sea, although it is doubtful whether that coast was colonized by the English in the immediate wake of their victory. Somerset did not firmly come into their possession until after 650 and there was a Brythonic king in Devon until 710. Cornwall retained a measure of independence for at least another two hundred years and the last reference to a Cornish king does not occur until 878. Cornwall had been absorbed into the kingdom of Wessex by 950, but it remained essentially Celtic in speech and in culture for centuries to come, and the consciousness of that inheritance remains significant to this day. The victories of the English were probably a stimulus for further Brythonic migration to Brittany. The migrants almost certainly hailed from the borders of Wessex, although there are suggestions that their leaders came from Wales. The second wave of migration began about 530; it reached its peak in the years 550-80 but it did not come to an end until about 700. By then the language and the traditions of the Britons were dominant throughout western Brittany and the cultural life of Lesser Britain developed on the basis of influences which sprang in the main from Wales, although the historian Fleurbaey argues that the Celtic culture of Brittany also includes elements inherited from Gaul.

As they had captured Gloucester, it would be reasonable to assume that the men of Wessex would seek to take possession of the northern as well as the southern coast of the Severn Sea. Despite the formidable obstacle represented by the gorge of the lower Wye, the coastlands of south-east Wales are essentially a tongue of the Lowland Zone. According to tradition, the men of Gwent defeated the English in about 630,

a victory which thwarted English attempts to gain control of the northern coastlands of the Severn Sea. Their victory was among the most important events in the history of Wales, for it was this success in defending the Wye border which saved Gwent and Glywysing for Wales.

While the Britons of south-western Britain were yielding to Wessex, those further north were seeking to dislodge the English colonies in their midst. It is possible that it was in 577, the year of Dyrham, that Urien, king of Rheged, attacked Lindisfarne (Ynys Metgawdd), besieging Deodric, the king of Bernicia. Nennius notes that three other kings fought alongside Urien, but that one of them, Morgan, jealous of the fame of Urien – the fame which is the main theme of the poems of Taliesin – brought about his death during the siege. About twenty years later – in 595 possibly – the Men of the North attacked Deira (Deifr), a kingdom which had perhaps developed from the German colony at York. If Ifor Williams's argument is correct, the heroes of this attack are the subject of Aneirin's great poem *Y Gododdin*. Its object was to capture the old Roman fort of Catterick (Catraeth), and Mynyddog Mwynfawr, the king of the Votadini, spent a year planning his campaign. It was a total failure and the words of Aneirin can be interpreted to mean that he alone of Mynyddog's men escaped with his life.

Shortly after the battle of Catterick, Bernicia and Deira were united by Aethelfrith, the first of the kings of Northumbria, and in the following half century Northumbria absorbed most of the kingdoms of the Old North. Aedan, king of Scots, was defeated in the battle of Degsastan in 603; Ceredig, king of Elmet, was driven from his kingdom in about 617; Rheged was annexed about 635, perhaps through the marriage of Oswy of Northumbria with Rhianfellt, the great-granddaughter of Urien. Carlisle was securely in English hands by 685. The kingdom of the Votadini came to an end about 638 when Edinburgh was captured by Oswy. By then, Strathclyde was the only one remaining of the Brythonic kingdoms of the Old North. Strathclyde survived for another four hundred years; indeed, when Northumbria succumbed to pressure from the Danes, Strathclyde expanded to include much of the old kingdom of Rheged. There, for a century and more after 900, Brythonic influences revived, as names such as Penrith, Caerdydd and Lanercost bear witness. Strathclyde was absorbed by the kingdom of the Scots in about 1018, but William II, king of England, seized its southern parts in 1092. Thus the present border between England and Scotland cuts across the kingdom of Rheged, a region bereft of memories of the heroes and



GLYWYSING: British kingdom

MERCIA: English kingdom

✕ Battle

Britons and English, 500–700

kingdoms which once flourished there – at least until the opening of the Rheged Centre at Penrith in 2000.

It was in Wales that such memories survived, and after the battle of Catterick it is only Wales that provides continued evidence of Brythonic resistance. Although Northumbria did not extend from sea to sea until at least 650, Aethelfrith (593–616) conducted several campaigns in the direction of the western sea. One such campaign resulted in the battle

of Chester in about 616 when Selyf, king of Powys, was defeated and when Aethelfrith, a pagan, ordered the slaughter of the monks of Bangor Is-coed – twelve hundred of them according to Bede – because they had fought against him with their prayers. Westward campaigns were continued by Edwin, Aethelfrith's successor and the first English king to be called *Bretwalda* – the overlord of the whole of Britain. Bede states that Edwin invaded Anglesey and an entry in the *Annales Cambriae* notes that he besieged Catguollaun on Ynys Glannauc (Ynys Seiriol) in 629.

Catguollaun was Cadwallon of the line of Maelgwn Fawr, a man who was himself not without claims to the status of *Bretwalda*. His father Cadfan, who died about 625, was certainly considered worthy of the title, to judge from his epitaph in Llangadwaladr, Anglesey: *Catamanus Rex sapientissimus opinatissimus omnium regum* (King Cadfan, the wisest and the most renowned of all kings). Edwin's success was short-lived: in 632, he was killed by Cadwallon in the battle of Meigen (Hatfield near Doncaster). In 633, Cadwallon killed Edwin's successors, Osric of Deira and Eanfrith of Bernicia, and Bede declared that it was Cadwallon's intention to exterminate the English race. That may have been a feasible proposition in 633, but in the following year Cadwallon in his turn was killed by Oswald, the brother of Eanfrith. The year 634 denotes the extinction of the possibility of restoring Brythonic supremacy in Britain. Centuries later, the author of *Brut y Tywysogyon* felt the need to emphasize that extinction when noting the death of Cadwaladr, the son of Cadwallon, in 682 (or possibly 664), a note which undoubtedly reflects the influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth. To the bald entry of the *Annales Cambriae*, the author of the *Brut* added: 'And from that time onwards the Britons lost the crown of the kingdom and the Saxons won it.'

In the battles of 632–3, Cadwallon's ally was Penda, king of Mercia. After Cadwallon's death, Penda resumed the struggle with Northumbria; Oswald was killed in the battle of Cogwy (Oswestry) in 641, and Penda was killed by Oswy, the brother of Oswald, in the battle of Cai (Winwaed) in 654. Mercia – midland England – was the last of the kingdoms of the English to come into existence. From 640 to 800, Mercia was the most important of those kingdoms and it was the Mercian kings who laid the foundations of the unity of England. The inhabitants of Wales had dealt from afar with the kingdoms of Wessex and Northumbria, but as Mercia expanded into the valleys of the Dee, the Wye and the Severn the Saxons came to the periphery of Wales, and it would be the western border of Mercia which would determine the border of

Wales. That border was defined at the expense of Powys. The territory of the Cornovii continued to be part of Powys at least until 600, but thereafter the region was infiltrated by Saxon colonists; in about 610, Beuno heard the English language – the language of paganism – being spoken on the further bank of the river Severn, an experience which caused him to migrate to Gwynedd. It appears that Viroconium, the capital of the Cornovii, had been abandoned by about 550 and that the court of Powys had moved to Pengwern, a more defensible site. Pengwern has been identified with Shrewsbury in the loop of the Severn, but a more likely locality is The Berth in the marshes and mosslands to the north of Baschurch. There is no contemporary evidence relating to the conquest of the middle Severn valley by Mercia, but two hundred years later, when Powys was again in anguish, poems were written which commemorate the conquest. They express the desolation of Princess Heledd on seeing the destruction of Pengwern and on hearing of the death of her brother, Cynddylan – events which probably belong to the years around 642. They are magnificent poems and in the dignity of her mourning Heledd gives the defeat of Powys a universal significance.

With the capture of Pengwern, the Saxon settlers had reached the fringes of the uplands of Wales. In doing so they severed the links, central to the pattern of agriculture, which had existed between highland and lowland. Such a border was inherently unstable: the men of the hills were bound to seek to repossess the plains, and there is evidence of efforts to do so in 655, 705-7 and 722. Mercia reacted by building Wat's Dyke, which extends from the Severn valley northwards towards the estuary of the Dee. The dyke marks the edge of the lowlands, and according to Cyril Fox it was the work of Aethelbald, king of Mercia from 716 to 757. It appears that Powys revived after his reign. There is a reference to a battle at Hereford in 760, and the *Eliseg* Pillar states that King Eliseg, who was in his prime around 750, freed Powys from the power of the English. By about 780, however, Offa, king of Mercia, was at the height of his authority; it is recorded that he attacked Wales in 778 and 784, and there is no reason to reject the tradition that it was during his reign (757-96) that the dyke associated with his name was constructed.

Offa's Dyke is one of the most remarkable structures in Britain. It has generally been assumed that Offa's intention was to provide Mercia with a well-defined boundary from Prestatyn to Chepstow, a distance of 240

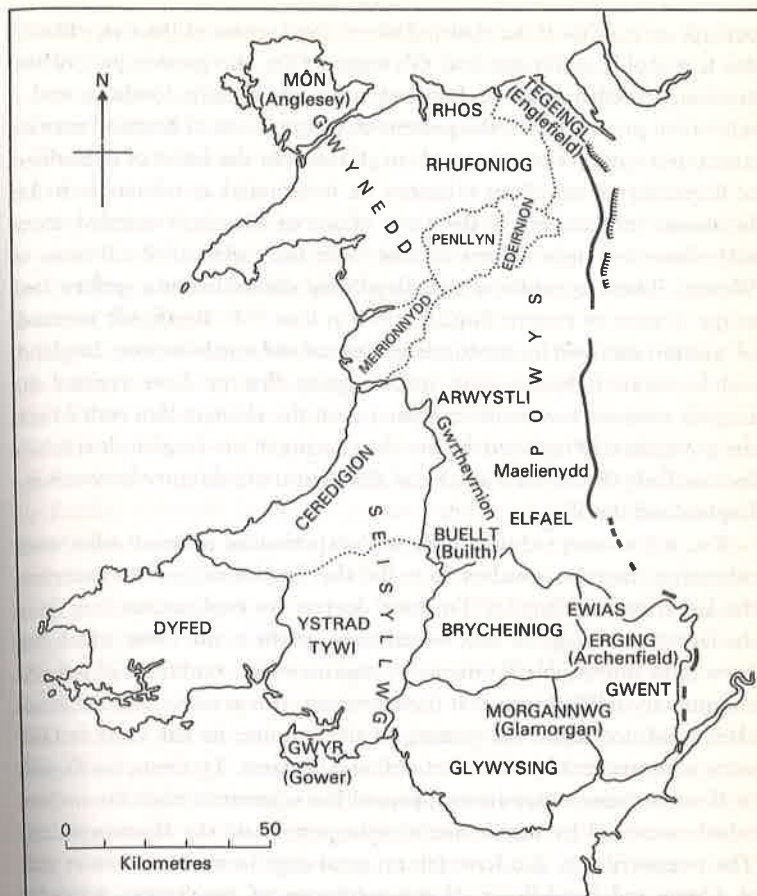
kilometres, but it is now doubted whether the entire structure associated with his name should be attributed to him. Natural barriers were utilized where that was practicable; where it was not, an earth embankment was built which in places still stands to a height of two and a half metres and which is, with its ditch, up to twenty metres wide. A total of 130 kilometres of dyke was constructed, assuming that all the sections of the earthwork associated with the name of Offa can be considered part of the same project. It is unbroken from Treuddyn in Flintshire to the river Arrow in Radnorshire, but around Llanymynech the opportunity was seized of using the river Severn as the boundary. To the south of the river Arrow, there are seventy-five kilometres in which there are only occasional signs of the dyke, probably because the thick forests of the Wye valley acted as a sufficient barrier. Between Monmouth and the Severn Sea it reappears, although with gaps, and it terminates on the coast in the Beachley peninsula. In the north, there is no evidence of the dyke over twenty-five of the forty kilometres between Treuddyn and the sea, a fact which suggests that it was unfinished when Offa was killed in the battle of Rhuddlan in 796.

The labour of thousands of men was needed to build the dyke, proof that the kingdom of Mercia possessed a high degree of cohesion; in places it is absolutely straight for kilometres, proof of the technical skills of its designers. It is twelve kilometres longer than Hadrian's Wall but, unlike Hadrian's barrier, that of Offa is an earth not a stone construction and it was probably never garrisoned. Its purpose was to denote rather than to defend the frontier. Where both lie side by side, Wat's Dyke is up to seven metres to the east of Offa's Dyke; the one gives Oswestry to Wales, the other to England. Wat's Dyke marked the boundary of the lowlands, but parts of Offa's Dyke are located as much as four hundred metres above sea level. The intention, no doubt, was to give to Mercia command of the approaches to the lowlands as well as of the lowlands themselves, an interpretation confirmed by the attempts of its designers to locate it in places which provide an extensive view to the west. It is hardly likely that the dyke marked the precise boundary between the two peoples; during the age of Offa, there were English communities to the west of it and Welsh communities to the east. If the intention was to create such a boundary, it was a failure, for the Welsh in later centuries repossessed large areas beyond it, particularly in the north-east.

In Cyril Fox's study of Offa's Dyke, his most interesting conclusion is that it was not the *diktat* of an English king which decided the location

of every kilometre of it. In planning it, there was a degree of consultation with the kings of Powys and Gwent. On the Long Mountain near Trelystan, the dyke veers to the east, leaving the fertile slopes in the hands of the Welsh; near Rhiwabon, it was designed so as to ensure that Cadell ap Brochwel ab Eliseg, king of Powys, retained possession of the fortress of Penygardden. Even more remarkable was the respect shown to the interests of the kingdom of Gwent. There is no more obvious boundary in the whole of Britain than the gorge of the lower Wye, but – assuming that the dyke in that region is part of Offa's project – his men went to the trouble of building the dyke on the crest to the east of the gorge, clearly with the intention of recognizing that the river Wye and its traffic belonged to the kingdom of Gwent; this recognition was underlined by continuing the dyke across the Beachley peninsula, where there was probably a harbour serving the trade of Gwent. During the years 750 to 800, the kings of Gwent – and probably of the whole of Morgannwg – were the sons and grandsons of Morgan ab Athrwys. It is clear that their kingdom wielded considerable influence, and on the basis of her study of the *Book of Llandaff* Wendy Davies has shown that it had a high degree of social stability.

When Offa's Dyke was being constructed, it was only in Wales, Strathclyde and Cornwall that Brythonic kingdoms still survived. In other parts of Britain, however, Britons survived in very considerable numbers, for the traditional belief that the Saxons killed or swept away the entire population of the territories overrun by them is wholly mistaken. In their desire to stress the essential Teutonism of the English nation, nineteenth-century historians such as Freeman and Green gave wide currency to that belief, and they could turn to Gildas and Bede for support. The central myth of British imperialism was the racial superiority of the English. The characteristics of the English were their emotional stability, their political maturity, their courage and their enlightened judgement, characteristics not shared by the Celts, the inhabitants of Ireland above all. Thus there could be no blood connection between the English and the Celts. Indeed, there were some English scholars who were reluctant to accept that the Irish and the Welsh were even Celts, for if they were they would be 'members', as were the Teutons, of the Indo-European 'family'. It is this reluctance which explains the popularity of terms such as 'Milesian' and 'Iberian'. Some of the historians of Wales and Ireland sought to refute such notions, but it is the voice of racist imperialism which reached the schools and it is only recently



Based upon William Rees, 1959

— Offa's Dyke
 - - - - - Wat's Dyke

The early kingdoms

in the wake of the collapse of racist-cultural theories as a result of the appalling calamities they have caused, that descriptions of the Welsh and the Irish as remnant peoples have disappeared from the text-books.

It is likely that there was slaughter, occasionally on a scale bordering upon genocide but, to judge from the comments of Bede on Cadwallon, it was not the monopoly of the English. It is likely too that people fled before the invaders, some to Brittany and others to Wales, including

perhaps an exodus of the descendants of the owners of the rich villas of the Cotswolds to Gwent and Glywysing. Yet the greater part of the pre-English inhabitants of England survived in their localities and a substantial proportion of the present-day population of England may be accounted among their descendants. Clauses in the Laws of Aethelbert of Kent, drawn up about 602, can be interpreted as references to his Brythonic subjects and in the Laws of Ina of Wessex, compiled about 690, there are eight clauses dealing with the rights of the Britons of Wessex. There is evidence that Brythonic continued as a spoken language in parts of eastern England until at least 700. Brythonic methods of taxation survived for centuries in western and north-western England, and Kenneth Jackson's river map suggests that in those regions the English element was small compared with the element descended from the population living there before the coming of the English. It is therefore unlikely that there is any racial distinction of substance between the English and the Welsh.

Yet, if it is accepted that those who experienced invasion were more numerous than the invaders, how did the English succeed in mastering the larger part of Britain? To some degree the explanation may lie in the fact that the regions they seized were, in the main, those which had been most thoroughly Romanized, regions where traditions of political and military self-help were at their weakest. It is possible that the lower classes did not regret the passing of the Empire; its last years in Gaul were accompanied by revolts of serfs and peasants. To them, the English in Kent or Sussex may have appeared less oppressive than the *civitates*, which were led by men concerned to perpetuate the Roman system. The peasantry may also have felt no great urge to maintain heroes such as Urien and his fellows. If the territories of the Saxons were not extensive until about 550, they included the most fertile parts of the island and, as the invaders extended their power over the lowlands, the strength of their strategical position increased. It has been argued that the resistance of the Britons was undermined by their internecine strife; Arthur was killed in a battle with his fellow Britons and one of Taliesin's poems commemorates the battle of Argoed Llwyfain fought between Urien and Flammddwyn. Too much should not be made of this argument, for such struggles were not a monopoly of the Britons; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is studded with stories of wars between the English. The success of the English after 550 may have resulted in part from the inability of the Britons to resist them because they had been enfeebled by the plague.

The plague originated in Egypt in 541; it had reached western Britain by 549, when it carried off Maelgwn Fawr. It would appear that it did not attack the English, perhaps because they, unlike the Britons, lacked contacts with the shores of the Mediterranean. The plague of 549 is believed to have been as devastating as the more famous plague of 1349, and there is some evidence of an almost equally deadly pestilence a century earlier. Both scourges seem to have been particularly inimicable to what was left of the Roman order. If there is truth in the assertion that the English avoided the old Roman cities, the explanation may lie in fear of the plague.

Yet, in comparison with the rest of the Western Roman Empire, it is not the success of the English which is striking but rather the length of time they took to achieve that success and the tenacity of the resistance of their opponents. In France, Spain and Italy, the 'barbarians' were rapidly victorious; by 486 almost the whole of Gaul was in the hands of the Franks, a people with an ancestry similar to that of the Saxons. The Gallo-Romans offered only feeble resistance, but within a few generations their culture had been adopted by their conquerors and the Latin of Gaul, proto-French, had become the language of the entire community. In the territories seized by the English the structures inherited from Rome disappeared, structures which in any case were not as firmly rooted as they were in the rest of the Western Empire. The invaders did not adopt the language of the natives; instead, the generations of struggle served to deepen ethnic and racial consciousness on the one side and the other. The undefeated peoples adhered to their Celtic language, while the language of the English spread over those parts of the island which came into their possession. At the same time, western Scotland was colonized by the Scots, migrants from Ireland; they planted in Dalriada, their kingdom in Argyll, a version of the Irish language, although it is likely that there were speakers of Q-Celtic in Scotland already. From Dalriada, the Irish or the Gaelic of the Scots spread to become, at least for a time, the language of most of the communities of Scotland. Thus the languages of Britain, unlike those of most of western Europe, are not descendants of colloquial Latin.

In 400, the inhabitants of Wales spoke Brythonic; in 700, they spoke Welsh. The evidence available for studying this linguistic change is scarce and complex; no complete sentence of Brythonic has survived and the first surviving words in Welsh are those inscribed around 700 on the famous stone in the church at Tywyn. Brythonic was cognate

with Latin and, like Latin, its nouns had different forms in the nominative, the accusative and so on, together with the termination *-os* (comparable with the Latin *-us*) and a number of other terminations. In changing into Welsh, these terminations disappeared and a name like *Maglocunus* became *Maelgwn*. P-Celtic lost many of its old formations in the century 450-550; although it is now doubted whether the change was as sudden as it was once believed to be, it is claimed that Vortigern (c.430) would not have understood Aneirin (c.595), although Gildas (c.530) would have understood both.

Early Welsh was the medium of Taliesin and Aneirin and, if it is accepted that the nuclei of their poems were written around 600, they prove that this 'new' language had the ability to be the medium of great literature. That ability was based upon centuries of composition in Brythonic, a tradition of praising rulers and heroes, of celebrating courage and generosity and of upholding the consciousness of the community, the function of the Brythonic poet and his Welsh successor for at least two thousand years. That tradition and the society which sustained it probably continued in a more unbroken form in the Old North, beyond Hadrian's Wall, than it did in Wales, although it is known that Maelgwn Fawr had his poets and that Taliesin sang in the court of Powys as well as in that of Rheged. The poems were composed to be chanted during the feasts of the court, for heroes enjoyed hearing about heroes, and part of the training of an apprentice poet was the commitment to memory of thousands of lines of the work of the masters – a practice noted by Julius Caesar among the Celts of Gaul. But at some stage, perhaps as early as 600, Welsh began to be written down. This was a bold act for, throughout the territories that had been part of the Western Empire, the Latin of Rome was the sole written medium, and hardly any attempts were made to write Latin's daughter-languages, French, Spanish and Italian, until after 1000. It is unlikely that there were many early Welsh manuscripts; paper had disappeared from western Europe by about 650 and parchment was expensive (most early writing in Welsh survives as marginalia); nevertheless, they were numerous enough for there to have been a cell in which to keep them at the fort of Dinbych Penfro (Tenby) in about 880. Alas, nothing remains of what might have been in that cell; all the early Welsh literature that has survived consists of later copies providentially preserved.

It is possible that the earliest poems in Welsh were composed before the adoption of the word *Cymry*. The heroes of Aneirin and Taliesin

were *Brythoniaid* (Britons), but a praise poem to Cadwallon probably written about 633 contains the line: '*Ar wynef Kymry Cadwallawn was*'. The poet was referring to the country rather than the people – the words *Cymru* (Wales) and *Cymry* (the Welsh people) were both spelled *Cymry* or *Kymry* until about 1560. Initially, the word undoubtedly referred to the Old North as well as to Wales, for it survives today in Cumbria, the heart of the old kingdom of Rheged. The word *Cymry* evolved from the Brythonic word *Combrogî* (fellow-countrymen), and its adoption suggests a deepening self-awareness among the Britons. Although the author of *Armes Prydein* (c.930) used the word *Cymry* or *Cymro* fifteen times, it only gradually came to oust the word *Brython*. That was the favourite word of the author of *Brut y Tywysogyon*; his entry for 1116 is the first to mention the *Cymry* and it was not until the years after 1100 that *Cymry* became as usual as *Brythoniaid* in the work of the poets.

To Nennius, his compatriots were *cives*, citizens – Romans, therefore – and there is also an echo of Romanization in the word used by the Saxons to denote the Britons. It is often claimed that the word 'Welsh' is a contemptuous word used by Germanic-speaking peoples to describe foreigners. Yet a glance at a dictionary of any of the Teutonic languages will show that that is not its only meaning. 'Welsh' was not used by Germanic speakers to describe peoples living to the east of them; to the English, *wealh-stod* meant an interpreter, but they had a different word for a translator from Danish. It would appear that 'Welsh' meant not so much foreigners as peoples who had been Romanized; other versions of the word may be found along the borders of the Empire – the Walloons of Belgium, the Welsh of the Italian Tyrol and the Vlachs of Romania – and the *welschnuss*, the walnut, was the nut of the Roman lands.

This recognition of the persistence of the Roman tradition is striking, particularly when it is placed alongside the continuance of the Brittonic language and its successor. It is often claimed that Wales is the sole country among those which were once a part of the Western Roman Empire in which a version of the language spoken by the inhabitants before the coming of the Romans is still in use. That is among the factors which have given rise to the belief that Wales is unique among the territories of the Western Empire in being the only part not conquered after the fall of the Empire by peoples from beyond its borders. These are attractive theories but they need some revision. From the point of view of language, the same claim could be made for the

Basques of Euskalherria or the Berbers of the Maghreb. As far as external conquest is concerned, authority was seized in Gwynedd and Dyfed by dynasties from beyond the borders of the Empire, and it can be doubted whether mid-Wales was ever within the Empire; the Romans of today do not believe that it was, as the maps on the walls of the Forum testify. Gwent, Erging and Glywysing, the most Romanized areas of Wales, are the only regions for which there is no evidence that they were overwhelmed by invaders from outside the Empire.

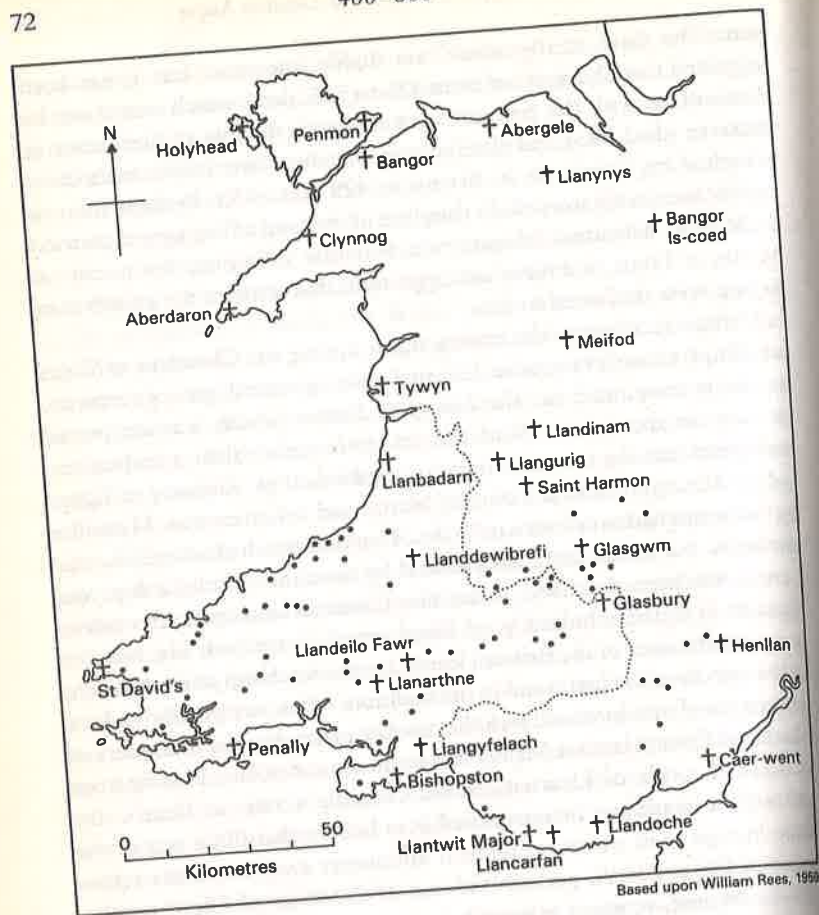
The uniqueness of south-east Wales in this respect may explain the key importance of that region as the cradle of the Celtic Church and the starting point of a movement which was to revitalize Europe. The history of the Celtic Church has a great fascination, but so scarce is the contemporary evidence and so abundant the stories invented in later centuries – usually with an ulterior motive – that it is now difficult to distinguish between the true and the false. Perhaps the very term 'Celtic Church' gives rise to confusion, for it was in fact an integral part of the universal Church; the idea that it was proto-Protestant is a mistaken notion of reformers a thousand years later. Indeed, it would be better to describe it as the Church among speakers of Celtic languages. Although it had its own distinct features, there has been an excessive tendency to discover within it the exceptional and the abnormal. If the Pope had virtually no authority over it, it should be borne in mind that in the period 400-800 the authority of the Pope over the Church as a whole was small in comparison with what it would become. Indeed, in those years Christendom had very little uniformity either in ritual or in organization.

It has been argued that the Church of Dyfrig, Illtud and David owed nothing to the Christianity that had existed in Britain at the time of the Roman Empire. It has been claimed that that Christianity perished in Wales as it did in England and that the Celtic Church originated from the work of missionaries sailing the western sea-routes. The present tendency, however, is to believe that it originated from a variety of influences and that it was in south-east Wales, above all, that those influences came together. The context of the life of Dyfrig (Dubricius), the first of the 'saints' of the Celtic Church, was essentially Roman. Although traditions relating to him were contorted in later centuries as a result of the ambitions of the bishops of Llandaff, it would be reasonable to consider that he was a bishop in Erging and that he presided over a Roman form of organization, perhaps from his bishop's seat at Aricon-

ium. The dates of the 'saints' are highly uncertain, but it has been suggested that Dyfrig lived from 425 to 505, dates which would not be inconsistent with the tradition that he was a disciple of Germanus of Auxerre (died 445) and that he was therefore heir to the orthodoxy preached by Germanus in Britain in 429 and c.436. Perhaps there is significance in the story that a daughter of the king of Erging was married to Magnus Maximus. Magnus was zealously orthodox, the patron of Martin of Tours, and there are suggestions that some of the churches of Erging were dedicated to him.

Dyfrig's successor as the leading figure among the Christians of Wales was Illtud, a man who can be discussed with a greater degree of certainty, for he is mentioned in *The Life of St Samson* which was written in Brittany in about 610. Illtud was an abbot rather than a bishop, an indication that the monastic tradition established by Anthony in Egypt before 310 and upheld at Tours by Martin and at Lerrins near Marseilles by Honorius had struck root in Wales. That tradition had severely ascetic elements, but it was also characterized by devotion to scholarship, and Lerrins has been described as the first Christian university in western Europe. It is the scholarship of Illtud which is stressed. He was the 'renowned master of the Britons, learned in the teachings of the Church, in the culture of the Latins and in the traditions of his own people'. A later generation of monks would seek the desolate places, but the monastery of Llanilltud Fawr (Llantwit Major) was in no sense desolate. Not far from it stood the villa of Llantwit, almost certainly a ruin in Illtud's day although it would not be unreasonable to believe that Illtud was of the same lineage as its owners. Eighteen kilometres away stood the settlement of Dinas Powys, perhaps the seat of the kings of Glywysing; in Illtud's lifetime, it was a place where objects from Bordeaux, Athens and Alexandria were in use – and if pottery could be carried to the Vale of Glamorgan so also could ideas, books and students. Llantwit Major can be considered to be the axis of the Christianity of the Celtic-speaking peoples. Samson was a student there, leaving for Dol about 520 to become the father of Breton monasticism. Samson's fellow students included Paul Aurelian, a leading figure in the traditions of Cornwall; they also included Gildas, who was considered by the Irish to be the leading authority on ritual and discipline. Indeed, almost all the leaders of early Irish monasticism had been trained in Wales.

The mood changed in the years after 500. It is no longer possible to recognize a figure like Dyfrig, a bishop in an essentially Roman



- † Mother church
- Church dedicated to David (Dewi) by about 1250
- The boundary of Deheubarth

The Celtic Church

environment, probably because that environment vanished when the economy which had sustained it collapsed. Asceticism gained ground at the expense of more worldly and scholarly values and there was a great increase in the desire to retreat to remote and desolate places. By 550 – perhaps as a result of the plague – the appeal of ascetic monasticism was almost irresistible. This was the true ‘Age of the Saints’, the years when Christianity consolidated its hold upon the inhabitants of Wales and

when the *llan* became central to the country’s toponymy. The first need of a community of Christians was a consecrated enclosure in which to bury their dead; the enclosure was the *llan*, and probably many centuries went by before most of the *llannau* were graced by places of worship.

The majority of the ‘saints’ commemorated in the *llannau* of Wales have only a very local fame; in many cases they were probably the donors of the land on which the enclosure was located and it is likely that they would have been forgotten had not local pride woven legends about them over the centuries. Yet there must be sound foundations for the wide recognition gained by men such as David (Dewi), Padarn, Teilo and Deiniol. There is virtually no contemporary evidence relating to them, and so far archaeology has yielded disappointingly little – a few huts at Penmon and Ynys Seiriol, the foundations of a chapel at Clynnog and virtually nothing else. Attempts have been made to interpret the range of the activities of the ‘saints’ on the basis of the churches dedicated to them, but as it is not known whether the dedications were contemporary or whether they reflect a later cult, there is now a tendency not to give too much weight to such studies. Nevertheless, there must be significance in the fact that, in the region between Pembroke and Hereford, there were by about 1200 more than sixty churches dedicated to David. (This is more than any other of the ‘saints’; Teilo, with about twenty-five, ranks second.) It cannot be claimed that the dedications denote the extent of the region which directly experienced David’s ministry. Yet, from about 900 onwards, there is increasing evidence of the fame of David and his church and it is reasonable to assume that such fame was based on traditions of a man wholly exceptional in influence and sanctity.

The Life of St David, written by Rhygyfarch (Ricemarch) of Llanbadarn in about 1090, is the earliest of the lives of the Welsh ‘saints’, and further details were provided by Giraldus Cambrensis around 1200 and by the anchorite of Llanddewibrefi in about 1346. Despite the lateness of these works and despite the incredible nature of much of the material they contain, some of their contents appears plausible. It is credible that David was of the royal house of Ceredigion and his emphasis upon hard work, vegetarianism and temperance shows that he belonged to the most ascetic branch of the monastic tradition. It is also likely that in his day he was the most respected leader of the Christians of Wales. It was that respect, no doubt, rather than any hierarchical office he held which allowed him to preside over ecclesiastical synods such as that at

Llanddewibrefi, held some time around 570. That was the occasion of his most famous miracle when the hill rose beneath his feet – although in view of the nature of the landscape of Ceredigion it would be difficult to conceive of any miracle more superfluous.

There is no certainty about the dates of David's lifetime, but the years 530-89 are a likely approximation. Teilo, Padarn and Deiniol belong to broadly the same period. They were abbots and, according to the fuller evidence of Ireland, they ruled monasteries or *dasau* containing a number of small churches in addition to the cells of the monks. Although Bede can have hardly been strictly correct when he states there were at least 2,100 monks at Bangor Is-coed in about 616, the *dasau* could be substantial. A stone raised at Aberdaron around 550 carries the inscription that Senacus was lying among his host of brothers; Llandeilo and Meifod were described as ecclesiastical cities and the word *civitas* was used by the Irish to denote a monastery. Nora Chadwick wrote an enchanting description of the life of these monasteries and she claimed that never did Europe have a Christianity more captivating in its appeal. The greater part of the evidence she used came from Ireland, but although Irish monasticism was the child of Welsh monasticism it cannot be accepted that what is true of the one is also true of the other. Ireland is more fertile than Wales and it had not been impoverished by the struggle against the Saxon invader; its material culture was therefore richer and the artistic heritage of its monasteries was far more magnificent. Ireland had never been under the rule of Rome, and the Roman Christianity, episcopal in its organization, planted there by Patrick between 432 and 461, proved short-lived; it was overwhelmed within a generation or two by the monastic system, and in Ireland the abbot replaced the bishop to a far greater extent than in Wales.

One of the outstanding features of Irish Christianity was its missionary zeal. In 563, Columba went to Iona to evangelize among the Scots and in 634 Aidan went from Iona to Lindisfarne to win the English to the Faith. The mission spread to mainland Europe: from 610, when the monastery of Luxeuil was established in Burgundy by Columbanus, until 1090, when a group of Irish monks set out for Regensburg on the river Danube, the Christianity of Europe would be heavily indebted to the zeal of the Irish. Bede claimed that the Welsh made no effort to convert the English; although his statement is not free of prejudice, the reference of Aldhelm (who died in 709) to the Welsh purifying the dishes used by the English and the story of Beuno on the banks of the Severn suggest

that the Christians of Wales were not anxious to have contact with the pagan English. If they had to have enemies, it was preferable for those enemies to be pagans; they would not then reach heaven as well as Pengwern. Yet it is difficult to accept Bede's statement in its entirety. Nennius's comment that Rhun, the son of Urien of Rheged, baptized the people of Northumbria is plausible; some of the most famous of the monasteries of Wessex may have had Brythonic origins and the Christianity of western Mercia must have been indebted to the Welsh. But the most zealous efforts of the Welsh were directed towards their fellow-Celts; they included missions not only to Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany but also to a community of *Brittones* dwelling in Galicia on the north-western coast of Spain.

Aidan's mission to Lindisfarne was the result of an invitation from Edwin, king of Northumbria. Aidan is the true apostle of the English. In later centuries, his contribution was played down in order to give the most prominent place to Augustine, whose mission to England in 597 was initiated by Pope Gregory the Great. Augustine established his chief church at Canterbury, the seat of Aethelbert, king of Kent, a man who had won overlordship over most of the English kingdoms. Gregory gave Augustine authority over all the Christians of Britain but, when Augustine rather arrogantly sought to give substance to that authority in 603, he was rebuffed by the Welsh bishops, Beuno perhaps among them. It was not fully accepted at the time that the Pope had the power to determine who was subject to whom, and there was very little reason for the long-established Christianity of Wales to accept the superiority of an archbishopric which had been in existence for less than a decade. Furthermore, there were political dangers in submitting to the authority of a religious leader who would of necessity be heavily under the influence of the policy of an English king. Thus began the sad saga of the relationship between Wales and Canterbury, a saga which lasted for over thirteen centuries.

Augustine had a measure of success in Kent, but Canterbury's missions to Essex and Northumbria proved short-lived; it was from the efforts of Aidan and his followers that the Christianity of most of northern and midland England sprang. There were differences in organization and ritual between the tradition of Aidan and that of Augustine. The most important was the disagreement over the date of Easter: the Celtic Church adhered to a system devised by the Western Church in 314, while Rome followed a system adopted there in 457. It was the desire

to abide by the traditions of the fathers, rather than ignorance of the change, which is the most satisfactory explanation for the conservatism of the Celts; as has been seen, they did not, between 457 and 603, lack contact with the shores of the Mediterranean. The date of Easter was no negligible matter – twenty thousand Russians met their death in a struggle over a similar issue between 1682 and 1690 – and the Easter of the Celts was elevated to be a symbol of freedom from the interference of Augustine and his successors.

It was the Celts who were the furthest away from Canterbury, and therefore the least likely to suffer from such interference, who were the first to conform. The Christians of the south of Ireland accepted the Roman Easter in 630. The matter was discussed in the Synod of Whitby in 664 and, when faced by the argument that it was Peter not Aidan who held the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, the Northumbrians accepted the Roman dating. Northumbria was followed by Strathclyde in 688, by the north of Ireland in about 697 and by the Church of Iona in 716. When Bede was writing his history, Wales was the most substantial of the territories which was resisting Rome, a fact which helps to explain his anti-Welsh sentiments, including his approval of the slaughter of the monks of Bangor Is-coed. The Welsh retained the old system until 768, when the date of Easter was changed among them by Elfoddw, *archiepiscopus Guenedotae regione*, as the *Annales Cambriae* described him. While the Welsh stood out against Rome, there seems to have been hardly any contact between their Church and the rest of Christendom; their isolation must have weakened them, for there is very little sign of activity in the Welsh Church in the century up to 768.

Indeed, there is very little evidence relating to any aspect of life in Wales in that century. It was the period when the economy of Europe reached its lowest ebb and when the heartlands of the continent almost fell into the hands of the victorious warriors of Islam. Light shone in a few places – in Ireland and Northumbria, for example, where Celtic and Roman traditions were interwoven into a rich synthesis – but there is little evidence of a similar synthesis in Wales. The Welsh had been weakened by their long struggle against the invaders and they reacted by adopting sterile isolationism – a response that characterizes them on occasion. The classical scholarship and the refined Latin which had once been treasured in places like Llantwit Major decayed. The Latin of Nennius, about 830, is uncouth compared with that of Gildas, about 540. After 642 there is no further evidence of contact between the

Welsh and the Men of the North, and Yvi, about 720, was the last known link between Wales and Brittany. The importation of fine pottery ceased and the practice of commemorating the dead with stone inscriptions came to an end. The nation of the Welsh was conceived on the death-bed of the Roman Empire; it was born in the excitement of the 'Age of Saints' but its infancy was meagre and lonely. Yet, as shall be seen, it would have an exhilarating adolescence.