

# Heretic Emperor

The Lost History of King Arthur

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## **BOOK 1**

### **THE CONTROVERSY**

*But the flames which once burnt around the memory of Arthur have long ago sunk into grey ashes. He wakes no national passions now. He has been taken up, with Roland and with Hector, and with all who died fighting against odds, into the Otherworld of the heroic imagination. His deeds are the heritage of all peoples; not least of the English folk against whom he battled. To this outcome many men have worked; the good clerk Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, the unknown author of the Lancelot and the Mort Artu, our own Thomas Malory. But most of all are we bound to praise that learned and unscrupulous old canon of St George's in Oxford, Geoffrey of Monmouth.*

*E K Chambers, Arthur of Britain, 1927*

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## Introduction

*The fact is that there is no contemporary or near-contemporary evidence for Arthur playing any decisive part in these events at all. No figure on the borderline of history and mythology has wasted more of the historian's time.*

*J N L Myres, 1986<sup>1</sup>*

How many other instances can you think of, anywhere on the globe, in any time period, where a literate people simply failed to record their own history?

Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries is, it seems, unique. Here, the sequence of 'one damned thing after another' goes unrecorded for almost two hundred years. This gaping hole in our past is now termed the Dark Ages. The professional historians who study the period seem to have no doubts about who is responsible for this lamentable state of affairs: the blame must rest with the British themselves.

The era is bordered by two dominions. In the first decade of the fifth century Roman Britain came to an end. By 410 AD the Roman Empire, weakened by internal pressures and under threat from invading barbarian tribes, lost control of Britannia, her most northerly province. By the last decade of the sixth century the bulk of that province, the fertile lowlands of the south east, was in the hands of Britain's own barbarian invaders, the Germanic peoples who became the English. Their dominion was acknowledged by the head of the western Roman Church, Pope Gregory the Great, who sent missionaries to convert them to the religion of the Empire. His emissary, St. Augustine of Canterbury, landed on Thanet, off the Kent coast, in 597 AD. In between these dates, in the Dark Ages, Britain was ruled by the natives.

By 410 AD Britain had experienced almost four centuries of Roman rule, and the native elite, at any rate, were literate. They were also Christian, and Christianity is a book-based religion. The new faith did not leave with the Romans. We know from Pope Gregory's own letters that the British Church was still in existence when Augustine arrived. The natives did not forget how to write. They left inscriptions carved on stone. Indeed, they even left a few documents. But the Dark Age British left to posterity no account of their political and military affairs, no record of the sequence of events that unfolded in the two centuries of their dominion. Today's Dark Age historians find themselves faced with an absence of evidence for this crucial period of transition. There is no reputable historical data from which to construct a coherent narrative of how Roman Britain turned into Anglo-Saxon England, of how the British dominion was reduced to the western margins of the island. What we have, instead, is a legend.

The gap in our history is where the British of an earlier era positioned their greatest

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<sup>1</sup> J N L Myres, *The English Settlements*, p15-16

hero, King Arthur. His tale is familiar to most of us: With its magic and enchantment, the wizard Merlin, the mysterious Holy Grail and the tragic love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, it has been told and retold for over eight hundred years and still finds an audience with each retelling. But behind this figure there is an earlier Arthur, a British political messiah, the defender of his people from alien invaders. He, likewise, was brought down by treachery, but his tragedy was not personal and romantic, it was political and military, and it engulfed the whole island.

The Dark Age Britons passed no written record down to today's historians, but their descendants treasured their own account of 'what happened next', after the Roman Empire ended in Britain and the British were left to rule their own lands. In time the creation of England confined the independent British to the western territories of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, but here they upheld, throughout the middle ages, a version of history in which they were the rightful rulers of the whole island. It was their land before the Romans came. After Rome's departure treacherous pagan Saxons arrived, originally invited in as allies and mercenary soldiers who turned savagely on their hosts and took over their country. But they were driven back. Under Arthur's leadership the natives resisted, and gained the victory. Britain was restored to British rule. Tragically, civil war and renewed invasion undid Arthur's achievement; the pagan Saxons eventually prevailed. Yet hope remained. Arthur would return to lead his people again, for Arthur had not died. His earthly career ended, in the earliest extant account, exactly as in the later stories: "Arthur himself, our renowned king, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the island of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to." So says Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his infamous, twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain*.

According to Geoffrey, Arthur fell at Camlann in 542 AD. *The History of the Kings of Britain* was written in 1138 AD. So the earliest extant account of Arthur's reign was written six centuries after his own era. Even in his own day Geoffrey was accused of fabricating. But he did not invent Arthur's military career as the victorious leader of the Christian British against the invading pagan Saxons. Arthur was already recorded in that role by the ninth century. And he did not invent the belief in our 'once and future king'. By Geoffrey's time, as the written record testifies, the entire British people, the Welsh, the Cornish and the Bretons, believed passionately that Arthur would return and restore their dominion over the whole island: one twelfth-century chronicler, aghast at their audacity, records, "Openly they go about saying that in the end they will have all, by means of Arthur they will have it back... They will call it Britain again." And Geoffrey didn't invent the Dark Age British restoration that pushed back the first Saxon advance. That event is presented as a fact in one of the very few Dark Age documents we possess, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*. The date of this sermon is disputed, but most hold it to be mid-sixth century. The writer is quite clear that, in his own day, the treacherous pagan Saxons who once drenched the island in blood have ceased to be a threat. He tells of a war between natives and incomers which was resolved in the natives' favour a generation previously. If Gildas is to be believed, then at some point in the late fifth or early sixth century there was a British victory, followed by decades of

British rule. So was there a real King Arthur?

The question has been the subject of vitriolic controversy from Geoffrey's day down to our own. For a time it did seem that the heat had gone out of the debate. Beginning in the late nineteenth century a consensus developed among professional historians which allowed that the pre-Galfridian Arthurian tradition really was rooted in historical fact, and that the Britons really did remember something of their own history. There was, after all, no getting away from Gildas, contemporary witness to a sixth-century British restoration. And the victorious British forces must have had a leader. Even the name was unexceptionable: Artorius was a Roman family name and there are inscriptions suggesting a member of that family served in the Roman army in second-century Britain. A likely character could, it seemed, be constructed from the surviving evidence. Of course he could be nothing like the Golden Age king of legend. The real Arthur would have to have been a man of his era, and that, historians knew, was a Dark Age. But a Romano-British general, struggling to defend Roman civilization against the encroaching barbarians in a lost outpost of the Empire, would seem to fit the circumstances. For most of the twentieth century, most historians accepted that there must have been such a man behind the myth of Arthur. But this view was decisively overthrown in the late 1970s, just when Thatcherism overthrew the post-war consensus in British politics.

The question 'Was there a real King Arthur?', though still of intense interest to the general public, is now one which no professional historian can even ask. The academic consensus which has held sway for the past thirty years has ruled it out of court, on the grounds that the early British texts which name Arthur have no more relevance to the study of the British Dark Ages than Geoffrey of Monmouth's fabulous book. Academic study of Arthur is now restricted to his legend, and the period where his own people located his earthly career is unknown and unknowable, its political history forever unwritten because no contemporary record exists. Like the man said, these aren't called the Dark Ages for nothing.

It is my contention that this darkness is not a result of the record's inadequacies, it is a construct of the Dark Age historians themselves. It is a consequence of their political and racial bias, whether conscious or unconscious; of their refusal to understand the surviving texts on their own terms; and of their strange willingness to accept a two hundred year gap in the record without any real explanation as to how it came about. Most of all it results from their antipathy to the Arthur of history and to his earliest known biographer. If Geoffrey of Monmouth had not been dismissed as a fabricator, but treated with the respect due to one of the greatest propagandists ever known, Dark Age historians could have avoided wasting quite so much of their precious time.

The political history of Britain can indeed be written, if only in outline. As the ideal materials for writing such a history do not exist, we must make use of what we have. We must draw out the evidence of all the available sources, the contemporary and the derivative, the insular and the continental, the historical and the legendary, the respectable and the thoroughly disreputable. What emerges is a clear and

comprehensible picture of independent Britain; of the forces which lead to its creation and its destruction; and of Arthur's role in this critical period of our history.

We must begin somewhere, so let's start where Arthur himself, according to our most disreputable source, had his beginnings. Tintagel, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's story, is where our once and future king was conceived.



## Chapter 1

### The Riddle of Arthur

*Short of some fantastic invention, a time machine, say, or an equally fantastic discovery, an inscription naming him from a period which has left barely a word engraved on stone, Arthur himself will always elude us.*

*Richard Barber, 1972<sup>2</sup>*

#### The Arthur Stone

In the summer of 1998, at Tintagel on the north coast of Cornwall, a team of archaeologists from Glasgow University made a remarkable discovery. They were engaged in excavating a 'high status secular settlement' of the sixth or seventh century - or Dark Age palace, as Cornwall's tourist chiefs, at any rate, were not embarrassed to call it. Ten days into the dig one of them turned over a piece of slate positioned as a drain cover, and found it bore an inscription, apparently naming the owner of a previous structure on the same site. The script was sixth-century, the language Latin. The man named was Artognou, pronounced, in the native British, 'Arthnou'. The archaeologist who uncovered the inscription described his initial reaction: "As the stone came out, when I saw the letters A-R-T, I thought uh-oh....."<sup>3</sup>

The find was unique, the first purely secular inscription in a purely secular context to be unearthed anywhere in Britain for this period. Professor Chris Morris, the chief archaeologist on site, termed it 'priceless'. It was, he explained "the first evidence we have that the skills of reading and writing were handed down in a non-religious context",<sup>4</sup> that is, that the Dark Age Britons did not sink back into illiteracy the moment Rome withdrew her legions. He was, however, "resigned to the fact that this is not how his great discovery will be remembered", as *The Guardian* phrased it.

The discovery was made on July 4th, and made public a month later, on August 6th. By the 7th, it was headline news: "Old slate brings King Arthur back to life" (*The Times*); "Nameplate leads trail to court of King Arthur" (*The Independent*); "Found, the Holy Grail that proves legend of King Arthur" (*The Express*); "King Arthur woz here!" (*The Sun*). The find even made the international press. The local newspaper, *The Western Morning News*, filled pages with the story, reporting tourist officials and traders declaring the find "a miracle" "an absolute godsend", and predicting "people from all over the world are going to want to see this". This enthusiasm is understandable. The entire economy of Tintagel is based on Arthurian tourism, for this, traditionally, is the place where King Arthur was born.

The story was popularised by the poet Tennyson in the nineteenth century, but it has

<sup>2</sup> Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p20

<sup>3</sup> reported in *The Guardian*, Friday, August 7th, 1998

<sup>4</sup> reported in *The Times*, Friday August 7th 1998

much earlier roots. Tennyson had the tale from Malory's *Mort d'Arthur*, a fifteenth-century compilation of the Arthurian legend, but the link between the hero and the place can be traced back further still. Arthur is conceived at Tintagel in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain*. Despite the name, this is not a history in any modern sense of that word, and over the years critics have had some very rude things to say about Geoffrey and his book. And as many people, even among the educated, seem unable to make the distinction between 'earliest known' and 'first ever', academics specialising in the British Dark Ages had long been firmly convinced that the connection between Arthur and Tintagel originated with a lying historian in the twelfth century. And then the slate was unearthed.

The public reaction to the find could hardly have contrasted more strongly with that of the Dark Age archaeologists who actually unearthed it. According to Professor Chris Morris, head of the Glasgow team, the slate could have no connection with Arthur since "Arthur is a figure who first enters the historical domain in the 12th century".<sup>5</sup> On the Glasgow University web site, his team continue to present the same line: "we must dismiss any idea that the name on this stone is in any way to be associated with the legendary and literary figure of Arthur" since "Arthur was only associated with Tintagel through the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, six hundred years later".<sup>6</sup> This assertion, they suggest, "may disappoint the romantic". It does rather more than that, it completely misrepresents the known facts.

Now it is true to say the slate does not prove the existence of King Arthur, or his connection with Tintagel. What it does prove, clearly, is that Geoffrey of Monmouth did not invent that association. There was a man called Arthur, or something like that name, at the right place and in the right time. Coincidence is not a credible explanation. Those who study Geoffrey's work have long been aware that he wove his narrative out of earlier sources, including British traditions long since lost. Indeed Lewis Thorpe, translator of the Penguin Classics edition of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, states explicitly: "What nobody who has examined the evidence carefully can ever dare to say is that Geoffrey of Monmouth simply made up his material."<sup>7</sup> Yet the Glasgow University website is saying precisely that.

Dark Age academics have a problem with the historical Arthur, as the discovery of the 'Arthur stone' illustrates. It is only to be expected that the press and the general public should heartily welcome apparent evidence that a popular legend is rooted in history. And it is perfectly proper that, where enthusiasm goes beyond the logic of the evidence, professional academics should apply a corrective. But this should take the form of a clear, precise statement of the known facts. The reason the Glasgow team failed to provide that in this case is that their field of study is dominated by a consensus which is politically and racially biased, and emotionally charged.

For the last thirty years the Arthur of history has been ruled out of court for those who study his era. Dark Age academics do not deny his existence, but they may not confront it objectively. So if the evidence appears to force such a confrontation, it

<sup>5</sup> reported in *The Times*, Friday August 7th 1998

<sup>6</sup> [www.gla.ac.uk/archaeology/projects/tintagel/ttg6.html](http://www.gla.ac.uk/archaeology/projects/tintagel/ttg6.html)

<sup>7</sup> *Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain*, Lewis Thorpe, Introduction, p17

cannot be seen for what it is. To understand how this distortion arose we must trace the history of Arthur's history over the last eight hundred years. At the base of the current consensus lies a single text, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, one of the most influential books ever written, and one of the most maligned.

### **The Pseudo-History of Britain**

To commemorate the new millennium Britain's *Sunday Times* produced a ten part supplement titled *Pages from History: Ten Documents That Changed The World - AD 1000 to 2000*. One document was selected for each century. For the thirteenth century it was Magna Carta, the acknowledged foundation of English parliamentary democracy. For the twelfth, for part 2, it was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. The principal contributor for this section was the Tudor historian David Starkey, who opened his article, *An English Romance*, with these words: "Great books should, we feel, be good books. Actually, some great books, by which I mean influential books, have been very bad indeed. An obvious example is Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Another, from the twelfth century, is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*."

We know rather more about Geoffrey than we do of most medieval writers. He was a British patriot, probably born in Monmouth but of Breton descent - a large contingent of Bretons had crossed the channel with William of Normandy. Towards the end of his life he was made bishop of St. Asaph in Flintshire, but he was consecrated whilst residing in London and the likelihood is he never visited his see, which was then under the rule of Welsh princes at war with the Norman rulers of England. He became a priest just a week before becoming a bishop. For most of his adult life he was simply a cleric, possibly with a teaching post at an Oxford college. It was at Oxford, between 1135 and 1138, that he wrote *The History of the Kings of Britain*. This was, he claimed, simply a Latin translation of a book in the British tongue - which in that period could mean Welsh or Breton - given him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford.

*The History of the Kings of Britain* purports to give a complete account of all the kings of Britain from the time the British first occupied the Island until their dominion was finally overthrown by the invading Saxons and they were driven into the western margins of their island. In all it covers nineteen centuries and ninety-nine kings, starting with Brutus the Trojan, great-grandson of Aeneas, who led the first human inhabitants into the island then called Albion.

The story was new to Geoffrey's contemporaries, though they would have been familiar with Aeneas, and would immediately have recognised the parallel. In Roman legend, immortalised by the poet Vergil, Aeneas escaped from the sack of Troy and finally settled in Italy, where in fulfilment of the goddess Venus' prophecy he became the founder of a mighty race, the Romans. His descendant Brutus likewise got off to a bad start in Geoffrey's tale. But a goddess intervened in his fate also and directed him to Britain, where the prophecy of Diana promised "a line of kings will be born from your stock and the round circle of the whole earth will be subject to them." Of the 98 British kings following Brutus the mightiest is Arthur, the principal subject of Geoffrey's

history, his reign occupying a quarter of the book. Scion of a dynasty raised to power in Britain after Rome had abandoned her erstwhile province to the assaults of pagans, Arthur completes the task begun by his grandfather Constantine, and having restored the island to native rule, goes on to greater glory. At the apex of his power his empire extends over all northern Europe, from Norway and Iceland down to the Alps. All is brought to ruin by the treachery of his nephew Mordred, just as Arthur, having slain the Roman ruler, is about to invade Italy.

Geoffrey did not invent Arthur; no contemporary would have accused him of that. But his was the first written account of Arthur's reign, outside the Celtic world at any rate. And it was directed to a lay audience, in an accessible style. It was an immediate sensation, a medieval best seller. All subsequent 'historical' accounts of Arthur's period for centuries to come were based on this book.

But from the start it had its critics. David Starkey's demonisation is not new. A twelfth-century Welsh churchman, Giraldus Cambrensis, in his *Itinerary through Wales*, tells of a demoniac, who, when St. John's Gospel was placed on his bosom, was relieved of his demons but when this was replaced with Geoffrey's history the devils came back thicker than ever. But Geoffrey's most famous opponent in his own century has always been William of Newburgh, another churchman, who began his own history with a ringing denunciation of Geoffrey's. Writing in the 1190s he tells us the now deceased Geoffrey was an impudent liar, his Arthur a mere fable related by a stupid race, and the very idea of the British ever rivalling the martial valour of Greece and Rome was simply laughable. And it was William's verdict on Geoffrey that was adopted during the Enlightenment, when the Middle Ages, and its myths, were finally laid to rest.

If Geoffrey is the source of the history of Arthur, and Geoffrey is a liar, it follows logically that the historical Arthur is a lie. Or so it seemed to the Enlightened. The origin of this view is sometimes mistakenly traced to Polydore Vergil, an Italian humanist and ecclesiastic writing under the patronage of Henry VIII, England's Bluebeard. But this is only because the Enlightenment traces its own origins back to the Italian Renaissance, so an Italian rejecting Geoffrey's medieval fables in the very period when Italy, in the words of Voltaire, "began to shake of that barbarous rust with which Europe had been covered since the decline of the Roman empire"<sup>8</sup>, appears portentous.

In fact, there was nothing new in Polydore's criticism of Geoffrey, and it had no impact on Arthur's position in British history. That position had always owed more to royal patronage than to textual analysis, and England's Renaissance dynasties were by no means ready to see the back of Arthur. Indeed Henry VIII, Polydore's patron, was almost preceded on the throne by a King Arthur. His father, Henry VII, a usurper by the usual rules of inheritance, portrayed himself as a direct descendant of King Arthur, via Cadwallader, the last of Geoffrey's kings, and took care that his eldest son and heir, whom he named Arthur, should be born at Winchester, then thought to be the site of Camelot. The boy predeceased him.

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<sup>8</sup> Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History*, trans. Thomas Nugent

Whilst the Tudors and the Stuarts held the throne of England Geoffrey's position was safe, and so was Arthur's. Both continued to be an inspiration to artists and writers in search of court patronage. Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* uses Arthurian epic to glorify Queen Elizabeth I. Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* take their stories from Geoffrey's history. Not until the Enlightenment was Geoffrey finally toppled, taking Arthur with him.

But this condemnation of Geoffrey did not rely on any study of his history, but on the Enlightenment's assessment of his period. The Dark Ages, then, extended from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance: a period when learning was entirely in the hands of the Church, which held men in the bondage of ignorance. Unscrupulous clerics perpetuated a series of literary frauds against a benighted, illiterate population, the most famous of these being the Donation of Constantine, which purported to be a deed of gift from the first Christian Emperor to Pope Sylvester and his successors, of the entire western Empire.<sup>9</sup> This obvious fabrication, concocted in the eighth century, fooled all Europe for 700 years and was only finally exposed in the Renaissance - or so the story goes.

Geoffrey was a cleric. He claimed his British history derived from an earlier written work, but no one has ever seen that text. The histories that preceded him, Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the continental chroniclers who might have been expected to notice Arthur's continental empire, make no mention of him. So it seemed obvious that Geoffrey was a liar, his history a fraud. The Progress of Reason had finally caught up with that unscrupulous cleric and his historically fraudulent hero.

But that was before anyone bothered to study Arthur's period.

### **Dux Bellorum**

The point of labelling a millennium a Dark Age was, precisely, to rule it 'out of court'. Enlightenment historians did not waste their time on the period between Rome's fall and her revival. It was unworthy of their attention. But once the relevant texts were studied it became obvious that Arthur was around long before Geoffrey's time, and not only in oral tradition. The Welsh texts may be scanty but they are unanimous - the British initially defeated the Saxon attempt to take over their island, and they did so under the leadership of Arthur.

Geoffrey's was not even the first written history of Britain, just the first known to most of his non-British contemporaries. The *Historia Brittonum*, long credited to 'Nennius', predates it by centuries and was one of Geoffrey's sources. It doesn't give an account of Arthur's reign, but it does list his victories over the Saxon, a list which culminates in Badon. And Badon's existence is confirmed by the English historian Bede, who testifies that the British did win a resounding victory over his own people. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle might prefer to keep quiet about it, but Badon is real. Even Bede's source has survived, the only British text from the Arthurian period known to have done so - a sermon written by a British monk named Gildas around 540 AD. In *The Ruin of*

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<sup>9</sup> This document can be viewed online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/donatconst.html>

*Britain*, a warning to his own generation, Gildas describes Badon as "pretty much the last defeat of the villains (the pagan Saxons), and certainly not the least".<sup>10</sup> He also tells us it was a siege, and was fought forty three years from the time of his writing. It was plainly decisive: when Gildas wrote the Saxons were not even regarded as a threat by the British rulers. Someone led the British to that resounding victory. Gildas does not name the victor. Later British tradition remembered him as Arthur. And so Arthur was restored to history.

Official, academic study of Arthur's period can be dated to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The first Chair of Celtic Studies in a British University was established at Oxford in 1877. Its first occupant was Sir John Rhys. His *Celtic Britain*, published in 1882, left the question of Arthur's existence is still open. But by 1891, in *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, he had made up his mind: There was a real Arthur. The legend, so far from disproving Arthur's reality, is a consequence of it - it came about through a confusion between the historical Arthur and a British deity of the same name. Arthur the man, in Rhys' theory, was the last bearer of the Roman title of *Comes Britanniae*, Count of Britain. In the Late Roman period this was the highest military office in the province, with a roving commission to defend it wherever needed. When Roman authority ceased in Britain, the *Comes Britanniae* would become the supreme authority in Britain, a local Emperor, and thus Arthur went down in Welsh tradition as *Yr Amherawdyr Arthur*, 'the Emperor Arthur'.<sup>11</sup>

This idea was taken up and further developed by R G Collingwood in *Roman Britain*, published in 1936 in conjunction with J N L Myres' *The English Settlements*, as the first volume of the *Oxford History of England* - hardly a fringe publication. Collingwood had no doubts about Arthur: He was a Romanised Briton. His name, Artorius was "a recognised though not very common Roman family name" and the man bearing it would be "most probably the son of a good family in one of the *civitates* of the lowland zone"<sup>12</sup> (the highlands of Britain were never Romanised, and were therefore, presumably, entirely free of good families). Gildas records the last British appeal for Roman aid, addressed to Aëtius, commander of the Roman forces in Gaul. What the British were asking for, says Collingwood, was a new *comes Britanniarum*. Failing to get one from Rome, they created their own. The *comes Britanniarum* commanded a Roman field army with authority to operate in any part of the island. This was Arthur's role, as the earliest history to name him accurately records. The ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* locates Arthur's battles in all quarters, and terms him *dux bellorum*, leader in battle. Bede similarly describes the Roman missionary St. Germanus as *dux belli*, on account of the part he played in another fifth-century battle against the barbarian invaders of Britain. And this explains the apparently mythological element in Nennius' account of Badon, crediting Arthur with slaying 960 of the enemy in a single charge. What is meant is not that Arthur personally killed 960 men at Badon, but that he fought usually as overall commander of the war bands of Britain's regional kings, but on this occasion no force other than his own was present. Or so

<sup>10</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 26.1

<sup>11</sup> John Rhys, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, p 7

<sup>12</sup> R G Collingwood and J N L Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p321

Collingwood surmised.

Thus Arthur appeared to have found a secure place in British history as 'the last of the Romans', whose futile resistance marked a brief interlude before history really got going again with the Anglo-Saxon conquest; a man historically real but historically irrelevant, as Alcock's *Arthur's Britain* concluded in 1971: "Apt symbol though he is for the period between the break with Rome in 407-10 and the emergence of the Heptarchy in the 7th century, in terms of *realpolitik* his achievement is negligible."<sup>13</sup>

This was an Arthur academics could stomach. The Dark Age generalissimo had nothing in common with the chivalrous king of medieval Romance, and was as far from Geoffrey's mighty European conqueror as it was possible to be. Indeed his only connection with the older British Arthur was his war against the Saxons, and he might as well not have bothered. The vast Arthurian legend evolved from a fantasy born of hopeless disappointment. The legendary Arthur was the compensatory daydream of a defeated people. With that cleared out of the way, Arthur's historicity was almost universally accepted. Richard Barber, who did not accept it, described it in 1972 as the "orthodox view" which was "in danger of becoming accepted as fact by default of a challenger."<sup>14</sup> And then John Morris published *The Age of Arthur*.

### **The Arthur Heresy**

*The Age of Arthur* came out in 1973, only two years after Alcock's *Arthur's Britain*. Its view of Arthur was precisely the reverse. Arthur was no obscure warlord whose military successes were almost immediately undone, but last in a line of British Emperors, conscious heirs of Imperial Rome. He left a legacy which shaped the political map of Britain, and the political thought of both the British and the English for centuries to come.

At the time of its publication John Morris was Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at University College London, a well-respected historian with numerous publications to his credit. His *Age of Arthur, a History of the British Isles from 350 to 650*, concerned the period of Celtic independence which historians still term the Dark Ages. Morris opposed this terminology. These were the formative years of British history, and they were not 'dark' for lack of evidence but because the evidence had not yet been systematically studied. The use of prejudicial terminology contributed to this unnecessary obscurity and neglect. If this vital era were to be studied properly in future, as a period in its own right and not as a mere transitional phase between Roman Britain and early England, it would have to have a proper name. And as historical periods are usually named for their most important ruler, this period should be termed the Age of Arthur.

It was in this era that the nations of Britain first came into being, and Arthur's role, Morris argues, was crucial. As a consequence of his success British history took a different turn from the rest of Europe. On the Continent, the German invaders were received into the decaying western Empire, infusing it with new life. The rigid, oppressive Roman state system survived, to cripple later centuries. Here, the initial

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, p364

<sup>14</sup> Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p17

success and eventual failure of the British resistance prevented any such fusion. The two races, so long enemies, remained distinct: The English retained their Germanic language and their more egalitarian traditions. The areas which remained free of the English were also freed from Rome's grip, an accidental consequence of the Arthurian resistance.

In Morris' view Arthur's intention was to revive the institutions of Roman rule, but on his failure to establish a unifying government in place of imperial authority, Roman institutions collapsed: But the native language and culture survived. The descendants of the British, the Welsh, the Cornish and the Bretons, remain a distinct, Celtic people, conquered but never absorbed by the English or the French. The nation of Scotland, too, originated in Arthur's reign. In his era, and under his authority, the Irish colony of Dal Riada was established as a bulwark against Pictish raids. Its first king, Aedan, named his son Arthur. Scotland came into being when this Irish kingdom and the ancient Pictish kingdom were united by dynastic marriage. All the nations inhabiting the island of Britain came into being in Arthur's era and so too did a distinctive insular Christianity, heir to the "radical, individualist and humanist Christian tradition"<sup>15</sup> of the Roman past, which went on to infuse all Europe as its evangelising monks migrated to the Continent.

Arthur emerges from Morris's analysis a profoundly important figure who merited his place in the historical consciousness of our ancestors, a real man who inspired, and deserved, his legend. "Earlier generations lacked the formidable equipment of modern scholarship, but they judged honestly. The instinct of the Middle Ages began its tradition with Arthur of Britain, the champion of a legendary golden age, the pattern of a just society which should be, but was not."<sup>16</sup> That went down like a lead balloon.

When John Morris published *The Age of Arthur*, Arthur's historical existence was the orthodox view, as even its opponents acknowledged. Soon after the position was completely reversed, and Arthur became a forbidden subject for academics engaged in studying his era. This dramatic change of heart was supposedly brought about by a twenty-page article published in 1977 in the academic journal *History*. In *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, Dr. David Dumville launched a savage attack on both John Morris and Leslie Alcock, denigrating both as incompetent historians who had failed to understand the nature of their sources, and proclaiming that, so far from naming his age, Arthur must be removed entirely from the Dark Age historian's consideration: "we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books."<sup>17</sup>

This attack was spectacularly effective. Suddenly academics concerned for their reputations strove mightily to distance themselves from Arthur. The most revealing case was that of J N L Myres, whose original *The English Settlements* was included within the same binding as R G Collingwood's now discredited *Roman Britain*, as the first volume of the Oxford History of England. In its 1986 republication Myres found it necessary - after half a century - to explain that "the implication ... of joint authorship

<sup>15</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p405

<sup>16</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p509

<sup>17</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p188



was entirely erroneous ... it was not in fact until his text was in final draft that I learnt that he proposed to pursue the story of Roman Britain far beyond its generally accepted termination ... to include ... the Arthurian age".<sup>18</sup> Even Leslie Alcock, instead of defending himself against Dumville's intemperate abuse ("... have not done the fundamental part of their homework ... failed to appreciate the nature of the source-material ... failed to attempt a twentieth-century view")<sup>19</sup> bowed to the pressure, "acknowledged the force of some of the criticisms" and abjuring his previous errors, "declared himself now 'agnostic' regarding Arthur personally".<sup>20</sup>

John Morris, unfortunately, was not around to mount a defence of his professional reputation. He died in 1977. The supporting notes which he thought would prove his case to the academic world were not then published. His untimely death left them, in the words of his publishers, "a vast mass of papers".<sup>21</sup> They finally appeared in 1995, as the first six volumes of *Arthurian Period Sources*. But by that time the verdict was too well entrenched.

How well entrenched is indicated in the preface of volume one of that series, written by John McNeal Dodgson and Robert Browning, in which they plead the cause of Richard White, who edited Morris' notes. They make it clear that they use the term 'edited' with caution: Richard White's contribution was only to make available as much as possible of Morris' surviving notes (one whole section had disappeared unaccountably);<sup>22</sup> he was not himself responsible for anything Morris said. This is stressed repeatedly: "It would be monstrous if this tremendous labour were to be rewarded by blame or disparagement in the course of any criticism of Morris' views which might ensue upon the publication of the notes." "We have to ensure that Richard White's devoted act of friendship does not bring him into obloquy or suspicion because of any real or supposed 'heresy' which disputation or research may discern or reveal in John Morris's notes."<sup>23</sup>

'Heresy' is a very odd word to find applied to an academic's considered opinion at the end of the twentieth century, but in this case it is plainly apt. If the editor of Morris' notes has to be rigorously defended against the charge of endorsing them, we are entering a very strange world indeed. The concept of guilt by association is a common threat under tyrannical regimes and persecuting religions, but how on earth was it allowed to enter the field of British academic scholarship?

There is obviously rather more to this than a simple case of incompetent scholarship. Prior to the publication of *The Age of Arthur* John Morris was a perfectly reputable historian. He was condemned without a proper hearing, since his entire evidence was not then in the public domain. That six volumes of supporting notes

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<sup>18</sup> J N L Myres, *The English Settlements*, introduction.

<sup>19</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, pp 174, 192

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, p84

<sup>21</sup> *Arthurian Period Sources*, dust jacket

<sup>22</sup> "The most drastic loss was the absence from Morris's papers of any significant materials for **S** ('Saxon Archaeology'), although it is clear both that he had done much work on this subject and that he intended it to be one of the major sections of his *Arthurian Sources*." *Arthurian Period Sources*, Publisher's Note.

<sup>23</sup> *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 1, p xv

failed to get the case reopened speaks volumes in itself. But even without those notes, *The Age of Arthur* is a five hundred page tome, yet it was supposedly demolished by a twenty page article in an academic journal. It doesn't add up, even before we subject David Dumville's article to any sort of scrutiny.

### **Sub-Roman Britain**

For a work of twenty pages to create a new academic consensus almost overnight, forcing upholders of the previous 'orthodox view' into hasty retraction or academic oblivion you would think it would need to be, at a minimum, logically argued and devoid of factual errors: This one isn't.

*Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend* presents itself as a demand for a more exacting study of those texts concerned with period in question, British history in the fifth and sixth centuries - a period which Dumville defined as 'politically dark', and as a transitional phase. Morris and Alcock, using Celtic texts to write the history of this period of Celtic dominance - and in doing so "breaking with the tradition of twentieth-century English historiography" - failed to understand the nature of their source material. Study of this material was "still in its infancy". It must be subject to the most rigorous scrutiny, "we need to understand the sources, motives, and technical terminology of each of writers".<sup>24</sup> At the end of Dumville's analysis, however, there's only one writer left to analyse. Having ruled out every other text as too late, too ridiculous, or out of bounds to the historian, the only text remaining from which to write a history of Arthur's period is, in Dumville's view, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*.

The only British texts surviving from the period, Dumville insisted, were the genuine writings of St. Patrick, which contained little of general relevance, and Gildas' sermon - which of course doesn't mention Arthur. In addition, a few Welsh poems might eventually contribute something to the study of these centuries, "those of the *Gododdin* attributed to Aneirin and the twelve poems said to be the genuine *oeuvre* of Taliesin"<sup>25</sup> but historians could not yet call upon their witness because they were still in the hands of the philologists, awaiting a 'secure' date. This statement assumes historians can contribute nothing from their own discipline to the dating of historical texts, and the era of composition can be determined from language alone and not content, while it tacitly admits the truth of Morris' assertion, that this period was 'dark' because it had not been studied. It was to counter this neglect that Morris proposed it should be named as a period in its own right, not treated as a transitional phase between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England. Among the neglected evidence for this era is one poem not in Dumville's list, which Morris dates, from its content, to the late fifth century - and that poem calls Arthur an emperor.

In Dumville's view, the earliest 'securely dated' reference to Arthur is the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, a work long attributed to 'Nennius' on the strength of a preface which gives the author that name. But this, according to Dumville, is a mistake: The Nennius preface has no claim to be an original part of the document and must be rejected, along with the forger's claim to have 'made a heap of all that I have

<sup>24</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, pp 174, 173, 192

<sup>25</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p178

<u>Arthur in the Written Record</u>		
6th century		<p style="text-align: center;"><u>The Ruin of Britain</u></p> <p><i>From that time, the citizens were sometimes victorious, sometimes the enemy, in order that the Lord, according to His wont, might try in this nation the Israel of today, whether it loves Him or not. This continued up to the year of the siege of Badon Hill, and of almost the last great slaughter inflicted upon the rascally crew. And this commences, a fact I know, as the forty-fourth year, with one month now elapsed; it is also the year of my birth.</i></p>
5th to 8th century	anon	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>The Battle of Llongborth</u></p> <p><i>In Llongborth I saw Arthur's Heroes who cut with steel. The Emperor, ruler of our labour.</i></p>
6th to 7th century	<u>Aneirin</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Y Gododdin</u></p> <p><i>He brought black crows to a fort's wall, though he was not Arthur. He made his strength a refuge, the front line's bulwark, Gwawrddur.</i></p>
8th century	anon	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Marwnad Cynddylan - Death Song of Cynddylan</u></p> <p><i>I used to have brothers. It was better when they were the young whelps of great Arthur, the mighty fortress.</i></p>
8th century	<u>Bede</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>A History of the English Church and People</u></p> <p><i>From that day, sometimes the natives, and sometimes their enemies, prevailed, till the year of the siege of Badon Hill, when they made no small slaughter of those invaders, about forty-four years after their arrival in Britain.</i></p>
9th century	<u>Nennius</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Historia Brittonum - British History</u></p> <p><i>The twelfth battle was on Badon Hill and in it nine hundred and sixty men fell in one day, from a single charge of Arthur's, and no one laid them low save he alone; and he was victorious in all his campaigns.</i></p>
9th to 10th century	anon	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Englynion y Beddau - The Stanzas of the Graves</u></p> <p><i>There is a grave for March, a grave for Gwythur, A grave for Gwgawn Red-sword; The world's wonder a grave for Arthur.</i></p>
10th	anon	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Annales Cambriae - Welsh Annals</u></p> <p><i>Year 72 (c. 516) The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights and the Britons were the victors.</i></p> <p><i>Year 93 (c. 537) The strife of Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut fell, and there was plague in Britain and in Ireland.</i></p>

found' - a claim which deluded incompetent scholars like Alcock and Morris into thinking that the *Historia Brittonum* preserved, unedited, sources from a still earlier period. The nameless author of the *Historia* did have sources, sources which are still extant. Dumville lists them, and concludes "I trust that the mere recital of these sources will suggest their utter flimsiness as records of this obscure century of our history".<sup>26</sup> This is not an argument: Dumville merely invites us to share his opinion.

And what of Gildas' sources? "Gildas", says Dumville, "is our prime text for the outline history of the period from the end of Roman rule to the mid-sixth-century", because "he alone seems to have had access to contemporary sources for the fifth century and was an eye-witness to the earlier sixth."<sup>27</sup> A *prime* text is not a *primary* source. Both words imply 'chief', 'principal', 'most important', but speaking historiographically a primary source is one not derived from any other, generally a contemporary witness. Gildas is not a contemporary witness for the fifth century. Dumville says that he *seems* to have access to contemporary sources, though in this case he does not list them. If he knew what they were, then surely he would. Dumville, then, does not know for a fact that Gildas derived his account of the fifth century from contemporary sources, it only seems to him that this is so, and on the basis of this subjective judgement we are invited to accept Gildas' sermon as our prime text for the century. But how do we know the sources that Gildas might seem, to David Dumville, to have had are any more reliable than sources the writer of the *Historia* actually did have?

Of course Gildas' is nearer in time to the fifth century than 'Nennius', but Dumville himself rules that argument out of court in dismissing Bede's contribution to sixth-century history. Bede's *History of the English Church and People* contains very little information on sixth-century history, but the little it does contain is highly significant. This is our prime text for the Augustine mission at the end of the sixth century. "But Bede", Dumville warns, "is not a primary source for later-sixth-century history. ... Because his work is a fine piece of scholarship, a mine of information, and written in a clear Latin style, it does not follow that we should necessarily accept his view of centuries for which he is at best a secondary authority as more reliable than that of any modern scholar. The argument that Bede lived much nearer to the fifth and sixth centuries than we do should not be allowed to cut any ice."<sup>28</sup> Bede completed his history in 731, and dated Augustine's mission to 596-7, 135 years before. About the same time period separates Gildas' sermon from the end of Roman Britain. So why should Gildas be regarded as more reliable, over that distance, than Bede? Because his Latin is turgid?

And so to Arthur, the real object of Dumville's attack, to whom he devotes a whole paragraph: "We come, last in the fifth century and first in the sixth, to Arthur, a man without position or ancestry in pre-Geoffrey Welsh sources. I think we can dispose of him quite briefly. He owes his place in our history books to a 'no smoke without fire' school of thought. What evidence is there for his existence? Almost twenty years ago

<sup>26</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p177

<sup>27</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p191

<sup>28</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p191-2

the late Professor Thomas Jones gave us an admirably balanced account of the early evolution of the legend of Arthur. Independently, and at almost the same time, Professor K H Jackson published an excellent survey reaching remarkably similar conclusions. The totality of the evidence, and it is remarkably slight until a very late date, shows Arthur as a figure of legend (or even - as Sir John Rhys pointed out last century - of mythology)."<sup>29</sup>

That two scholars who studied the Arthur legend found Arthur to be a figure of legend is not significant, merely inevitable: if Arthur were not a figure of legend they could not have studied his legend. Perhaps David Dumville meant to say these two professors had show Arthur to be *purely* a figure of legend, but that is not what he actually does say. As for Sir John Rhys, he said something completely different. In Rhys' view Arthur was historical. He argued that the *legend* of Arthur arose from the confounding of a real man with a British deity in consequence of the similarity, or identity, of their names. It is hard to see how Dumville made this mistake, when he gives as his reference the very publication - *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, Oxford, 1891 - in which Rhys puts forward his theory that Arthur was the last Roman military leader of Britain, and was for that reason remembered as *Yr Amherawdyr Arthur* - 'the Emperor Arthur'.

What Dumville actually proposed in *Sub-Roman Britain*, though in his misrepresentation of John Rhys position he didn't quite admit it, is that Dark Age scholars should tear up all previous academic study right back to the time when Celtic studies first became an academic discipline, and start again from scratch, this time with Arthur ruled out of bounds at the outset. And his fellow historians agreed to go along with this radical proposal, supposedly on the strength of the arguments put forward in this article. I find this incredible, and would like to suggest an alternative explanation. David Dumville's article only pronounced the sentence of hereticisation against John Morris; it did not provide the reason for it. The real cause of Morris' denigration is that peculiarity of Dark Age scholarship so sharply revealed in the saga of Arthurian Tintagel.

### **Arthur and Tintagel**

In 1998, an inscribed slate came to light at Tintagel - the sole example of its kind so far discovered, the only inscriptions from a secular site in Britain from this period. The discoverer describes his own initial reaction as "uh-oh..." In the circumstances this is not so surprising. Dark Age archaeologists had by then been fighting a losing battle with Arthurian Tintagel for decades, and all the evidence they had uncovered to date had sided with the opposition.

Arthurian Tintagel, in our era, begins with the publication of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Alfred Lord Tennyson was a hugely influential writer. A leading figure in the Victorian Gothic revival, poet laureate from 1850, his compositions span nearly six decades, and Arthurian legend was his principal inspiration. Tennyson took from Geoffrey, via Malory, the idea of Arthur's origin at Tintagel, and included it in his

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<sup>29</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p187

famous Arthurian epic. Thus the link between our legendary king and that wild and windswept spot on the Cornish coast was re-established in popular consciousness. Tennyson himself visited Tintagel, and other romantics followed in his wake. And so Tintagel's Arthurian Tourist industry was born. The anti-Romantic backlash was not slow in coming.

Before any excavation had taken place, the evidence against the Arthur/Tintagel connection was precisely the same as the evidence in favour: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. This was prior to any academic study of that text, when Geoffrey still stood convicted as a fraudulent historian. Which is why Henry Jenner, the first Grand Bard of Cornwall and the foremost Cornish scholar of his day, opened the attack on Arthurian Tintagel in 1926 with the statement that: "historically and romantically Tintagel Castle is rather a fraud".<sup>30</sup>

It was Jenner who originated the notion that Dark Age Tintagel was a Celtic monastery, an idea was taken up enthusiastically by the first archaeologist to excavate at Tintagel, C A Raleigh Radford, in 1933. His excavation was intended 'to test the basis of the Arthurian traditions', that is, it was intended to disprove them, which it duly did, at least in the view of Raleigh Radford and his fellow archaeologists.

The Dark Age Celtic monastery theory, by denying any secular, defensive use of the site, divorced Tintagel from any possible historical warlord with whom the Arthur legend might have originated. But this was its only virtue. None of the supposed evidence, it is now admitted, actually lent itself to this interpretation. The rectangular 'monk's huts', quite unlike any other Celtic monastic habitations of the period, have been redated to the Middle Ages. The earthwork separating Tintagel Island from the mainland, which Raleigh Radford took for a '*vallum monasterii*', a ritual barrier separating the monks from the profane outside world, was substantial enough to have required a sizeable labour force for its construction, and was plainly intended for defence. Even Raleigh Radford's interpretation of the medieval castle is now rejected. He dated its foundation to the 1140s, making it contemporary with Geoffrey of Monmouth and so providing that writer with a motive for bringing Tintagel into his Arthurian story - and further reason for dismissing the possibility that Geoffrey drew on an earlier tradition. But the medieval castle was built, not by Earl Reginald, bastard son of Henry I, but by Earl Richard, second son of King John, almost a century later.

As excavation continued at Tintagel, so the evidence against the monastery theory increased exponentially. From the first, the archaeologists were unearthing sherds of Mediterranean amphorae - huge pottery jars from the 'late Roman' period, used for the storage and transportation of wine and oil. In keeping with his theory, Raleigh Radford held they had contained imported communion wine. But excavation kept unearthing more of them, and in the end there were simply too many. Professor Charles Thomas, who undertook the task of re-cataloguing the Tintagel pottery finds in the 1980s, found that the imports to this one site were "not only dramatically greater than that from any other single site dated to about AD 450-600, but also larger than the combined total of all such pottery from all known sites"<sup>31</sup> (his italics). The ascetic Celtic monks,

<sup>30</sup> Charles Thomas, *Tintagel: Arthur and Archaeology*, p55

<sup>31</sup> Charles Thomas, *Tintagel: Arthur and Archaeology*, p71

separated from mundane world behind their huge *vallum monasterii*, would appear to have been conducting a vast import-export trade. There had to be a likelier explanation.

It was not until the 1990s that the 'high status secular settlement' was finally exposed by the spade, and the Celtic monastery theory was disproved beyond any shadow of doubt. It was under threat long before this: indeed Professor Thomas states that it was politely demolished by a Dr Ian Burrow in 1973, at a conference which Raleigh Radford attended, but which didn't move him to change his views. Yet it still had its adherents as late as the mid-80s. So a theory for which there was never any supporting evidence, which originated purely in a desire to contradict the Arthurian legend, was upheld for the best part of a century and only finally abandoned when the evidence against it proved completely overwhelming. And throughout it never ceased to be respectable. Professor Thomas himself, while recording all the details of the monastery theory and its deconstruction, carefully avoids even the mildest censure of Raleigh Radford or his academic heirs.

In stark contrast to this generous treatment of a fellow academic is Charles Thomas' stern reprimand to Arthurian Tintagel itself for deluding a gullible public: "Arthurian Tintagel must share in a wider responsibility for a divergence between the Past As Wished For, and the Past As It May Really Have Been. Nowhere is the gap more pronounced than in respect of places, like Tintagel Island and the Castle, that really exist, and here a finger points sternly at Tintagel."<sup>32</sup>

It was R G Collingwood who first coined the expression 'Past As Wished For'. His argument was that in the study of history we must distinguish between these three things: a Past In Itself, which is the object of the historian's study but, of its very nature, unattainable; a Past As Known, which is a construct the historian builds from the available evidence; and a Past As Wished For, "in which a convenient selection of the evidence is fitted into a predetermined intellectual or emotional pattern."<sup>33</sup>

Raleigh Radford thought he saw a Celtic monastery at Tintagel. He had acquired that notion from Henry Jenner, who suggested it before any excavation had occurred. The evidence unearthed was made to fit that pattern in Raleigh Radford's description of the site. But the evidence does not fit that pattern. The Celtic monastery was never there.

We now know what was there - a Dark Age Palace.

This was an important site; the vast amount of imported pottery testifies to the owner's wealth. It was also a royal site; carved into the rock at a high point on the Island is a depression known as King Arthur's Footprint. Similar footprints are known from other parts of the Celtic world, and the written record testifies to their use in the ceremonial inauguration of Celtic kings - the ritual continued in Ireland well into the Middle Ages. A memory of Tintagel's royal connections continued into the Middle Ages, in Charles Thomas' view. He points out that the medieval castle served no strategic purpose, and there is written evidence that Richard, Earl of Cornwall from 1227, went to considerable lengths to acquire the site. Why should he have done so? Professor

<sup>32</sup> Charles Thomas, *Tintagel: Arthur and Archaeology*, p127

<sup>33</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p3

Thomas suggests that medieval Cornish tradition preserved a memory of Tintagel as the ancient seat of the country's rulers, and that this, rather than any practical or military considerations, determined the new earl's choice of location for his prestigious new dwelling.

Now if Tintagel's royal associations were remembered locally into the thirteenth century, they must have been remembered in the twelfth century, when Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey's writing shows a strong bias towards Cornwall and his description of Tintagel's topography has convinced many that he must have been there. Then he could have come into contact with local traditions about its royal past. And medieval Welsh tradition quite independent of Geoffrey placed Arthur's capital, not at Camelot, but at 'Kelliwic in Cornwall'. All the literary evidence, and all the evidence unearthed by archaeology right up to the discovery of the Arthur Stone, lined up on the side of Arthurian Tintagel. Yet it was Arthurian Tintagel, and not the Dark Age Monastery, which stood condemned as a Past As Wished For,

And then the slate emerged bearing that name. Now whether the historical Arthnou has any connection with the legendary King Arthur, beyond linguistic similarity, is a separate question. The fact is the name was associated with the site back in the sixth century, not just in the twelfth. With that discovery, the only logical conclusion to be drawn from the available data was that Arthurian Tintagel was not a twelfth-century invention. Geoffrey of Monmouth drew on an earlier, local tradition which associated the name and the site. And that earlier tradition preserved a fragment of genuine sixth-century history.

But the Dark Age historians and archaeologists who unearthed the stone and discussed it with the press did not arrive at the only logical conclusion. They came up with something else entirely. The Arthurian connection which we layfolk quite naturally wish to see at Tintagel is, they regret to inform us, impossible. It is impossible because it was made by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century. No amount of evidence in favour of Arthurian Tintagel could ever outweigh this absolutely decisive evidence against: Geoffrey said it so it must be false.

This process of illogic is not restricted to Tintagel but occurs wherever the Dark Age evidence appears to lend support to Geoffrey's history. Ten days after the announcement of the Arthur stone *The Guardian* carried a report on an amateur historian's claim to have found a fortified Dark Age site near Bath. He had indeed found something: Geoffrey Wainwright, while not at the time prepared to concede it was a Dark Age construction, did say: "There is certainly enough there to justify further investigation, and I have asked my local officers to do just that." Yet when Neil McDougall first tried to interest professional archaeologists in his discovery they dismissed him with contempt. In the words of Roy Canham, the Wiltshire county archaeologist who "visited the site with misgivings" but immediately recognised its worth: "Various people have told Mr McDougall to take a tablet and lie down". Why?

The article's headline says it all: 'Amateur finds evidence of Arthur's most famous victory'. The victory referred to is Badon. Badon, we know, really happened - it is



mentioned in the only British text to survive from the period, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*. Gildas doesn't name the victor, nor do we learn from him where the battle took place, though most historians seem to accept a westcountry location. But Gildas does describe it as a siege, which implies a fortified stronghold. According to Geoffrey, that siege took place in the neighbourhood of Bath. And that explains why, when Mr McDougall first brought professional archaeologists to view a fortified hill-fort in the neighbourhood of Bath, they could see nothing but nineteenth-century quarry waste.

If the evidence tends to support Geoffrey's story, the evidence isn't there. If the evidence can't be ignored, then the logical inferences to be drawn from that evidence must be expressly denied. What Dark Age academics must avoid at all costs is any appearance of having endorsed the historicity of *The History of the Kings of Britain*. That, in essence, was John Morris' heresy.

### **The Question of Arthur**

John Morris probably knew what he was up against. In *The Age of Arthur*, in a section on humorous literature, he states that "It ought not to be necessary to warn that no word or line of Geoffrey can legitimately be considered in the study of any historical problem".<sup>34</sup> It was useless to protest.

The Arthur to emerge from Morris' analysis was not the Dark Age warrior who had no impact on later history. His influence, Morris argued, was profound: his victory and subsequent defeat determined the political shape of Britain down to the present time. The nations of Britain originate in the era which should bear his name. He was the most important ruler of his age, remembered by later generations not only for his military success but also for the justice of his rule. It is "the rigid complacency of historical determinism", in Morris' view, which makes Arthur's struggle appear doomed and futile. It cannot have appeared so at the time, and indeed had things worked out only slightly differently "the Roman aristocracy of Britain ... might have won the war before their society was destroyed, and permanently upheld in Britain a western state as Roman as the empire of the east, ruled from a London as imperial as Constantinople."<sup>35</sup> Later British tradition called Arthur an Emperor, and that, in Morris' view, is what he was: Emperor of Britain, his dominion extending beyond the island to the British colonies in Gaul.

But the Arthur that Geoffrey introduced to European history was also an emperor, a Golden Age ruler whose dominion extended beyond Britain, covering all north western Europe down to the Alps. He was the equal, and the enemy, of the Emperor of Rome. The correspondence is not exact. Morris' Arthur is no enemy of Rome: "Arthur's government had only one possible and practicable aim, to restore and revive the Roman Empire in Britain."<sup>36</sup> But it was altogether too close. David Dumville's denunciation points up the parallel: Morris' historiography "has given us what is in all essentials a medieval view of the period."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p428

<sup>35</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p507

<sup>36</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p117

<sup>37</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p192

Morris had sought to have the prejudicial term 'Dark Ages' discarded, and this era named like any other, after its most important ruler. In response to his efforts his fellow academics have resolved to exclude Arthur from their enquiries - he has already wasted too much of the historian's time - and to retain a terminology designed to denigrate the pre- and post-Roman inhabitants of Britain. This era is not dark for lack of study but dark by its very nature, David Dumville assures us. All the materials John Morris thought could be used to shed light on the formative period of our history are, in fact, useless for the purpose. Historians of fifth- and sixth-century Britain have only one text to turn to, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*.

In truth the anti-Arthur view of British history does derive from just one text, from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. Arthur 'enters the historical domain in the twelfth century' only if he was invented by that fraudulent historian. The new consensus is simply a return to the pre-Rhys view of Arthur's historicity, the view which preceded any academic study of the subject.

We must start again from scratch, David Dumville advises. All the sources which might contribute to this historiographical process must be subjected to the 'closest critical scrutiny'. But we must not approach the data with an open mind, "we must have ready the right questions to ask of it".<sup>38</sup> And what are the 'right' questions? Dumville helpfully provides a list.<sup>39</sup> The question of Arthur is not included. His existence is no subject for respectable academic enquiry.

But these restrictions apply only to professional historians and archaeologists with reputations to consider and careers to advance. The rest of us are still free to ask the questions of most interest to us. First among them must surely be the question of Arthur's historical existence. Was there a man behind the myth, and what role did he play in our history?

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<sup>38</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p192

<sup>39</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p174

## Chapter 2

### Britain's Emperor

*The notion that Arthur was some sort of emperor has its origins firmly in the Middle Ages. In the 20th- and 21st-centuries, however, the notion that the historical Arthur was genuinely an emperor, ruling over all Britain, has not – to say the least – achieved widespread assent amongst academics.*

*Thomas Green, 2004<sup>40</sup>*

#### Dark Century

There is a problem with the historical Arthur. History has to be written from the written record, ideally from the contemporary written record, and for Arthur's period there simply isn't one. At the time Geoffrey wrote, as other writers testify, the entire British people, the Welsh, the Cornish and the Bretons, treasured the memory of Arthur, their victorious leader against the Saxons who had usurped their land. And Geoffrey was not the first historian to write of Arthur's victories. But the first, the *Historia Brittonum*, takes us back only to the ninth century, three hundred years after Arthur's time. For Arthur's own period, the period when the British did hold back the Saxon tide and restore the country to native rule, only one text remains.

"The years of Arthur's lifetime are the worst recorded in the history of Britain", John Morris tells us. "No text at all that could have named Arthur survives, except Gildas ... but the traces of lost texts are many."<sup>41</sup> It is from these traces, fragments copied into later documents, that the history of Arthur's time, he argued, must be pieced together. Though they testify to his vital role in our history they can tell us nothing about the man himself: "He remains a mighty shadow, a figure looming large behind every record of his time, yet never clearly seen."<sup>42</sup>

The post-Morris consensus discerns no mighty shadow against the pitch black of the British Dark Ages. David Dumville's analysis has left us with only that one text from which to write the history of one hundred and fifty years. *The Ruin of Britain* must be our prime text, not just for the period of Gildas' lifetime, but for the entire fifth century. 'An obscure century' Dumville terms it, 'politically dark' - and indeed it would be if the only informant we had was Gildas.

Gildas is not a historian. What he wrote was a sermon, as historians frequently state in his defence. His historical introduction was not designed to inform later generations, but to back his case - that case being that the wickedness of contemporary British rulers, both lay and ecclesiastical, must inevitably arouse God's wrath and lead to military defeat. Incidents from British history are selected to illustrate

<sup>40</sup> *The Monstrous Regiment of Arthurs*, Appendix 1 of *The History and Historicisation of Arthur*

<sup>41</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, pp 87 & 116

<sup>42</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p116

this theme: It is not a complete account of all that happened, or of all that he knows. Gildas is not given to naming names. From the time of the Roman conquest to the victory of Badon he names only eight individuals; three martyrs, three emperors, a continental general, Aëtius, and a British leader, Ambrosius Aurelianus. The last two are from the fifth century: Aëtius is the recipient of a letter from Britain, which Gildas quotes, Ambrosius the man he credits with initiating the British resistance which culminated at Badon. So our prime source for the fifth century actually names only two individuals for that entire period. He gives us no dates at all: We have to deduce them. For the whole of his account of independent Britain, with the assistance of other sources, we can deduce just three - and two of these turn out to be completely wrong.

The only reliable date is Badon, and even here we can't deduce an exact date from Gildas' text. He tells us he wrote in the forty fourth year after that victory, which was the year of his birth and so, he says, he can be sure of it: But when was he writing? Roman and Irish sources tell of a devastating plague which hit the Roman Empire in 541 and reached the British Isles a few years later, and as this is the sort of thing Gildas would likely have included among the punishments inflicted by God on the sinful British, it is generally accepted that his sermon predates it. So Badon would have been fought in the last years of the fifth century. The period of independent Britain begins, for Gildas, with the usurpation of Magnus Maximus, which he interprets as a rebellion against Roman rule. Magnus Maximus was proclaimed emperor in 382 AD. The third date comes right in the middle of these. The British, Gildas tells us, despite having wickedly rebelled against the Romans, turned to their old overlords for aid when the barbarian Picts and Scots attacked, three times begging by letter for assistance. The last of these letters, the one that Rome didn't respond to, was addressed to 'Aëtius, thrice consul'. Aëtius was the Roman general in command of the armies of Gaul, who was made consul for the third time in 446, and died in 454 AD. So, going by Gildas' narrative, the time period between the end of Roman Britain and the victory of Badon is just over a hundred years, with the letter to Aëtius neatly in the middle.

But Gildas' narrative does not divide so neatly. It can't be made to fit the dates he gives. Almost all that Gildas has to say of post-Roman Britain has to be fitted in after the Aëtius letter - including a renewed barbarian raid which reduced the country to destitution, then a God-given victory over the raiders followed by a corrupting period of peace and prosperity in which evil kings were anointed, slain and replaced by others still more vicious, and during which a rumour of renewed barbarian threat caused the British ruler and his council to recruit Saxon mercenaries, then a 'long time' in which the Saxons increased in numbers until they were strong enough to rebel against their British paymasters, and so to the rebellion and its aftermath, the whole island devastated, all its cities overthrown, the population enslaved, in hiding or fled abroad, and then to the eventual British resistance under Ambrosius Aurelianus, which was obviously of some duration, as Gildas tells us the battle went first to one side then the other until the Badon gave the final victory to the British. For the first half of the period Gildas has nothing to relate except that the ex-province was raided by Picts from the

north and Scots, i.e. Irish, from the west, from which Roman relief expeditions twice rescued the cowardly, faithless Britons and then declared that they would return no more. If we really did have to rely on Gildas for the outline history of the fifth century we would have little idea of the real cause of the end of Roman Britain. Fortunately we don't.

## **Maximus**

According to Gildas, Roman Britain came to an end with usurpation of Maximus, who was raised to the imperial power by the rebellious soldiery of Britain as a consequence of the Arian heresy. This "caused the fatal separation of brothers who had lived as one", so that Britain, still Roman in name, was no longer so by law and custom. The island "cast forth a sprig of its own bitter planting",<sup>43</sup> and sent Maximus to Gaul, where he seduced the neighbouring provinces away from Rome's empire and set up the throne of his wicked kingdom at Trier. One of the two legitimate emperors he destroyed, the other he drove from Rome, but he was finally defeated and beheaded at Aquileia. This was the beginning of Britain's problems. The entire British military had followed the tyrant abroad, never to return, and as a consequence the island was left defenceless and a prey to barbarian raids.

He's wrong on three counts. The barbarian raids on Britain did not begin with Maximus, Roman Britain did not end with him, and Maximus was no Arian.

It was barbarian raids which first brought the Spaniard Magnus Maximus to Britain, under the command of Count Theodosius, in 367 AD. The historian Ammianus, a contemporary writer, recounts Theodosius' suppression of a "barbarica conspiratio" involving Picts, Scots Franks, Saxons and Attacotti.<sup>44</sup> Maximus' own successes against the barbarian enemies of Britain are elsewhere recorded,<sup>45</sup> and it was in Britain that he was made Emperor. He always claimed he was raised to power against his will, and some are inclined to credit this, including the orthodox Christian historian Orosius, ally of Augustine of Hippo. Maximus himself was not only orthodox, he was ostentatiously pious and a patron of St. Martin. It was Valentinian II, the legitimate emperor who, Gildas tells us, the tyrant Maximus wickedly drove from Rome, who was actually an Arian (or more correctly his mother was - Valentinian was just a child at the time). The Emperor whom Maximus drove from his very holy life, in Gildas' tale, was Valentinian's elder half-brother Gratian, though Maximus always disclaimed responsibility for the assassination. Maximus certainly intend to overthrow Gratian, but he did not intend to overthrow the Rome Empire.

Gildas perspective is shared by 'Nennius'; Maximus went forth from Britain with all the British troops, killed the king of the Romans and held empire over all Europe. This is an anachronistic interpretation of events. The later empire was not ruled as one unified whole. The reforms of Diocletian, emperor from 285 to 305, decentralised the imperial administration to enable a more rapid response to local emergencies. The empire was divided into four prefectures, ruled by two Augusti, emperors of the east

<sup>43</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 12.3, 13.1

<sup>44</sup> There appears to be no consensus as to who the Attacotti were.

<sup>45</sup> in the Gallic Chronicle of 452.

The History of Britain from Continental and Native Sources - 360 to 440		
Continental sources	Gildas	Nennius Computus
360 Picts & Scots attack Britain - <i>Ammianus</i>		
367 Count Theodosius rescues Britain from attack by Picts, Scots and Attacotti (Saxons and Franks meanwhile raiding Gaul) - <i>Ammianus</i>		
383 - 384 Magnus Maximus, raised to the purple in Britain, defeats Picts & Scots and crosses over to Gaul with British forces - <i>Prosper of Aquitaine</i> , <i>Orosius</i> , <i>Gallie Chronicler</i>	Britain revolts from Roman rule & sends Maximus to Gaul with imperial insignia. The usurper is beheaded.	
388 Magnus Maximus is executed by Theodosius I - <i>Prosper of Aquitaine</i>		
395 - 400 Stilicho rescues Britain from attack by Picts, Scots and Saxons - <i>Claudian</i>	Maximus having withdrawn all the troops from Britain, the island is defenceless and falls prey to attack by Picts and Scots. The Britons send envoys to Rome pleading for aid.	
403 Stilicho withdraws troops from Britain and the Rhine frontier to defend Italy - <i>Claudian</i> , <i>Olympiodorus</i>		
406 - 407 Barbarian invasion of Gaul causes Britons to raise & depose two usurpers, Marcus and Gratian, in quick succession, then a third, Constantine III, who crosses over into Gaul with British forces - <i>Olympiodorus</i> , <i>Orosius</i> , <i>Sozomen</i> , <i>Zosimus</i> , <i>Procopius</i>	1st Roman rescue & defeat of barbarians. Building of Antonine wall by an irrational mob.	
409 Britain revolts from Roman rule and repels barbarian threat - <i>Zosimus</i>		
410 Honorius writes to the cities of Britain instructing them to look to their own defence - <i>Zosimus</i>		
411 After the defeat of Constantine III, Honorius fails to retake Britain - <i>Procopius</i>	2nd barbarian attack & 2nd Roman rescue. Building of Hadrian's Wall and the Saxon Shore Forts	425 Accession of Vortigern
429 Germanus 1st mission to Britain defeats the Pelagian heresy - <i>Prosper of Aquitaine</i>		
431 Palladius made bishop of Irish - <i>Prosper of Aquitaine</i>	Romans advise idle, cowardly natives to defend themselves & say goodbye, meaning never to return	428 <b>Saxon Advent</b>
437 Germanus 2nd visit to Britain ends in the spring of this year (deduction) - <i>Constantius of Lyon</i> , <i>Gallie Chronicler</i>		437 Battle of Wallop

The History of Britain from Continental and Native Sources - 440 to 500		
<i>Continental sources</i>	<i>Gildas</i>	<i>Bede</i>
441 Britain falls into the power of the Saxons - <i>Gallic Chronicler</i>		
446 Aëtius' third consulship		
450-457 EMPEROR MARCIAN		
451 Battle of Mauriac Plain		
454 Assassination of Aëtius		
457 Assassination of Valentinian III		
457-474 EMPEROR LEO		
470 The British King Riothamus brings 12,000 troops from overseas to the aid of Emperor Anthemius in his war against the Goths, but is defeated at Bourges by King Euric's innumerable army before the Romans could reach him - <i>Jordanes, Gregory of Tours</i>		
474-491 EMPEROR ZENO		
486 Clovis, king of the Franks, kills Syagrius and absorbs his kingdom - <i>Gregory of Tours</i>		
491-518 EMPEROR ANASTASIUS		
496 Baptism of Clovis - <i>Gregory of Tours</i> (diplomatic dating - more likely 503 AD)		
	3rd barbarian attack, total destruction of British economy and society. Appeal by letter to Aëtius, "thrice consul". No Roman rescue. Famine	<b>Saxon Advent</b> during the reign of Emperor Marcian [449-456]
	1st British victory over barbarians, economic boom, moral collapse and civil violence, kings anointed & slain "with no enquiry into the truth", satan worshipped as an angel of light.	
	<b>Saxon Advent</b> as rumour of old enemies' return prompts Proud Tyrant and council, blinded by God, to invite in a people they "feared worse than death even in their absence"	
	Saxon mercenaries, numbers swelled by reinforcements, "for a long time" accepted British payments whilst planning treachery	
	Saxon revolt, Britain devastated, survivors driven into wilderness or exile.	
	"After a time" Ambrosius Aurelianus, last of the Romans, leads counter-attack. Protracted war culminating in <b>Badon</b> (in the 44th year after which Gildas writes his sermon).	<b>Badon</b> 44 years after Saxon Advent [i.e. 493-500]

<b>The Continental Sources for British Fifth-Century History</b>		
		<b>Century</b>
<b>Ammianus Marcellinus</b>	Historian and soldier	<b>late 4th</b>
<p>Greek nobleman and soldier, born around 330, served under Constantius II and Julian the Apostate.</p> <p>Wrote <i>Res Gestae</i> in retirement in Rome in the last decades of the fourth century. The surviving books of this work cover the period from 353 to 378.</p>		
<b>Claudian</b>	Court poet	<b>late 4th, early 5th</b>
<p>Greek speaking Alexandrian, resident in Rome between 395 and 404.</p> <p>Wrote poetry in praise of his patrons, especially Stilicho.</p>		
<b>Orosius</b>	Christian historian & theologian	<b>5th, 1st quarter</b>
<p>Spanish priest, friend and disciple of Augustine of Hippo, involved in the Priscillianist and Pelagian controversies.</p> <p>His <i>History Against the Pagans</i>, written between 415 and 417, aimed to counter the pagan accusation that Rome's misfortunes were a consequence of her deserting the old gods</p>		
<b>Olympiodorus of Thebes</b>	Pagan historian and diplomat	<b>5th, 2nd quarter</b>
<p>Egyptian born, active in imperial politics in the early fifth century, was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Huns in 412 by Honorius and attended the court of Theodosius II.</p> <p>His <i>Books of History</i>, written before 430 and covering the period from 407 to 425, survives only in fragments and citations by other writers.</p>		
<b>Prosper of Aquitaine</b>	Christian writer and polemicist	<b>mid 5th</b>
<p>Layman from Marseilles, engaged in controversy against the Pelagians, attached to Pope Leo in some secretarial capacity.</p> <p>His <i>Chronicle</i>, a continuation of Jerome's (itself a continuation of Eusebius') was published in three editions, in 433, 445 &amp; 455.</p>		
<b>Sozomen</b>	Church historian	<b>mid 5th</b>
<p>A native of Palestine, practised as a lawyer in Constantinople in the first half of the fifth century</p> <p>His <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>, dedicated to Theodosius II, was intended as a continuation from Eusebius', covering the years from 323 and 439, but the surviving work ends at 425. Heavily reliant on other authors, including Olympiodorus.</p>		



<b>The Continental Sources for British Fifth-Century History</b>		
		<b>Century</b>
<b>The Gallic Chronicler of 452</b>	Semi-Pelagian from Marseilles	<b>mid 5th</b>
<p>Two Gallic chronicles, named for their last entries (452 and 511) survive but all reference to their authors has been lost.</p> <p><i>The Gallic Chronicle of 452</i> was another continuation of Jerome's Chronicle. Content indicates the writer was a devout Christian from Marseilles with semi-Pelagian sympathies.</p>		
<b>Constantius of Lyon</b>	Biographer of St. Germanus	<b>late 5th</b>
<p>Gallic nobleman, orator, poet and priest, friend of Sidonius Apollinaris</p> <p>Wrote his <i>Life of St. Germanus</i> from about 480 to 494, when old and infirm. Believed to have drawn on the eye-witness testimony of Lupus of Troyes, Germanus' companion.</p>		
<b>Zosimus</b>	Pagan historian and courtier	<b>late 5th, early 6th</b>
<p>Byzantine courtier in the reign of Anastasius.</p> <p>Wrote his <i>New History</i> between 498 and 518, in six books starting with Emperor Augustus. Apparently unfinished, the work ends in 410. The later sections are believed to derive from Olympiodorus.</p>		
<b>Procopius of Caesarea</b>	Byzantine historian and courtier	<b>mid 6th</b>
<p>Secretary and legal adviser to count Belisarius, one of Emperor Justinian's generals. Also civil servant and propagandist at Justinian's court, and secret enemy of that emperor.</p> <p>His <i>History of the Wars</i> was written in Greek before 554.</p>		
<b>Jordanes</b>	Historian of Gothic ancestry	<b>mid 6th</b>
<p>Believed to have been bishop of Crotona and companion to Pope Vigilius during his imprisonment in Constantinople by Emperor Justinian.</p> <p>His <i>Origin and Deeds of the Goths</i> was written in 551, purportedly an abridgement, from memory, of Cassiodorus' <i>Gothic History</i>, now lost.</p>		
<b>Gregory of Tours</b>	Gallo-Roman bishop	<b>late 6th</b>
<p>Born around 540, a nobleman boasting ancestors of senatorial rank on both sides of his family. Bishop of Tours from 573 until his death in 594.</p> <p>His <i>Ten Books of History</i> cover the history of the world from the creation to the year 591, but concentrate mainly on the Merovingian rulers of France and their bishops, and are better known as <i>The History of the Franks</i>.</p>		

and west, each with his 'heir apparent', titled Caesar. Diocletian's co-emperor, the western Augustus, was Maximian, whose Caesar, Constantius Chlorus (father of Constantine the Great), ruled over the Gallic prefecture comprising Gaul, Britain and Aquitaine, and established his capital at Trier. A north-western emperor, ruling from Trier, was no innovation in Maximus' day. The western provinces, deserting Gratian for Maximus, were not leaving the empire in their own eyes, they were replacing an ineffective prince with an able general. The Eastern Emperor Theodosius initially accepted Maximus as his co-emperor. Gildas himself mentions imperial insignia "which he was never fit to bear".<sup>46</sup>

It was quite logical for Maximus to anticipate the support of the eastern emperor. Emperor Theodosius was the son of his old commander, Count Theodosius, who had been executed by Gratian's father, Valentinian I. But it was Gratian who had made Theodosius emperor, and the child Valentinian II was already effectively under Theodosius' control. So when Maximus extended his power to Italy, and Valentinian and his family fled to Theodosius for protection, the eastern Emperor took the opportunity to extend his own power. He married Valentinian's sister Galla and marched west to restore his brother-in-law and to destroy his father's old comrade. This was not necessarily a good thing for the Empire, and it was certainly not a good thing for the west.

It was Maximus' rebellion which exposed Britain to barbarian raids, Gildas tells us. When the tyrant crossed into Gaul he took with him the entire military force of the island, which never returned home. 'Nennius' concurs: Maximus' soldiers settled in Brittany. This is quite probable. Contemporary sources tell us Theodosius dealt leniently with Maximus' followers, but he could hardly have risked returning them to Britain, that hotbed of revolt.

But that doesn't mean Britain was left undefended. There were enough troops remaining for Stilicho, Emperor Honorius' chief general, to withdraw a legion for the defence of Italy in 403, and enough left after that to back Constantine III, the last British usurper, in 407.

### **The End of Roman Britain**

Maximus was not the first, nor the last, of the British usurpers. Roman Britain actually came to an end in the reign of Constantine III, whom Gildas never mentions. He was not forgotten in Dark Age tradition. 'Nennius' represents him as the last Roman Emperor in Britain. Bede, following Orosius, tells us he was a common soldier of no merit made emperor solely on account of his auspicious name<sup>47</sup> - the name of the first Christian Emperor, who was also raised to the purple in Britain, though Constantine the Great is never counted among the British usurpers since nothing succeeds like success. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's history Constantine III appears as the brother of the king of Brittany, who on the invitation of the archbishop of London accepts the crown of Britain and rescues the country from pagan invaders. King Arthur is his grandson. This is nonsense, of course, but it would surely have struck Geoffrey's

<sup>46</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 13.1

<sup>47</sup> Procopius, in contrast, describes him as "a man of no mean station", in *History of the Wars*, III.2.31

medieval readers as far more likely than Bede's improbable tale.

There is no Emperor Constantine in Gildas' account; Maximus is the only British usurper he mentions. But we can never confidently put Gildas' silence down to ignorance. Indeed, David Dumville states specifically that, since Gildas had read Orosius, he must have known more than he says: "But Dr. Miller has recently show us that the reason why Gildas ignored Constantine III after his account of Maximus was that the structure of his narrative would render mention of Constantine irrelevant to his account ..."<sup>48</sup> Then logically we may suppose that Gildas knew rather more of the real causes of the British usurpers than he says, but it didn't suit the structure of his narrative, or the purpose of his sermon, to include this information. He blames congenital wickedness exacerbated by heresy for his countrymen's treasonous actions against the God-given authority of Rome. But the true causes, we know, were military.

Britain's repeated raising of usurpers was not originally a rebellion against Rome, though it was an expression of the extreme dissatisfaction, over a long period, that the ruling elite of the west felt towards central government. As the Empire's centre of gravity shifted to the east the interests of peripheral regions were increasingly neglected in favour of its Mediterranean heartlands. The solution favoured by a sizeable section of the ruling elite, not only of Britain but of the wider western Empire, was precisely that devised by the capable Diocletian; devolution of power from the centre. The Gallic prefecture needed its own ruler, who could respond effectively to local problems. The policy is condemned by its failure. Historians are generally of the opinion that these local Emperors contributed to the fatal weakening of the western Empire, and so to its ultimate disintegration. In particular they are blamed for the loss of Britain to the Empire, which is usually regarded as an unmitigated tragedy. But had they succeeded in establishing themselves as north-western Emperors, had the legitimate emperors in Italy and Constantinople accepted them as co-rulers, the history of Europe might have been very different. One ancient source states that Constantine III, the last ruler of the Gallic prefecture, secured the Rhine frontier better than any ruler since the Emperor Julian.<sup>49</sup>

In conventional interpretation the Roman Empire, overwhelmed by German barbarian invasions, collapsed in the fifth century. A particularly bad year was 406, when hordes of Vandals, Alans and Suevi crossed the Rhine and devastated Gaul. In 410 Rome itself was taken by the Goths under their King Alaric. Britain was lost to the Empire around the same time, so the end of Roman Britain appears a footnote in the larger tragedy of the Fall of Rome. But Rome did not fall in 410 AD.

It was the city, and not the empire of Rome, which fell to Alaric. To some at the time it was a profound psychological blow: St. Jerome in Bethlehem lamented: "in the one city the whole world dies ... who would have believed that Rome would crumble, at once the mother and the tomb of her children?"<sup>50</sup> But this is purple prose, not a literal description. Orosius was quick to point out that Alaric only occupied Rome for three

<sup>48</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p180

<sup>49</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, Book 6. Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor, ruled from 361 to 363.

<sup>50</sup> *Commentary on Ezekiel*, prologue, and preface to book 3 - see John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p23

days, whereas in 390 BC Brennus and his Gauls had occupied it for six months. And at that point it was not the capital of the Empire, or indeed of any part of it. Constantinople was then the principal Imperial city. The Western Roman Emperor, Honorius, safe in his new capital of Ravenna, not only survived the sack of Rome but retained enough strength to destroy Constantine III - though not enough to retake his territories.

Constantine III came to power in consequence of Honorius' failure to counter barbarian incursions into the Gallic prefecture. In order to defend Italy, Stilicho, Honorius' Master of Soldiers, had withdrawn troops from Britain and from the Rhine frontier, hence the incursions of 406. The German tribes fanning out over Gaul in 407 looked to be making for the channel ports. Threatened, Britain resorted to the time-honoured strategy of elevating a usurper. "The soldiers in Britain were the first to rise up in sedition, and they proclaimed Mark as tyrant. Afterwards, however, they slew Mark, and proclaimed Gratian. Within four months subsequently they killed Gratian, and elected Constantine in his place, imagining that, on account of his name, he would be able to reduce the empire firmly under his authority."<sup>51</sup> Constantine initially lived up to expectations: He succeeded in checking the barbarians in Gaul and even offered to assist Honorius against Alaric. Like Maximus, he was acknowledged co-Emperor by the Italian ruler, but only briefly. The last British usurper was defeated and executed in 411 AD. But by that time Britain was outside the Empire.

The end of Roman Britain is generally dated to 409. This is thought to be the year when, according to Zosimus' history, Honorius wrote to the *civitates*, the cities, of Britain, telling them to look to their own defence.<sup>52</sup> The letter is clearly a response to an official British appeal for assistance. Honorius was not relinquishing the Empire's claim over Britain, he was simply saying the central government could give them no help at that juncture, and legitimising any steps Britain's civil authorities took for their own defence.

But British officials writing to Honorius were thereby renouncing Constantine, and that implies removing Constantine's officials. John Morris finds evidence for precisely such a move: a letter from a British bishop, Fastidius, addressed around 410 to a young widow, makes reference to recent political events. Her husband had been judicially murdered, but those who condemned him then met the same fate: "in changing times we expect the deaths of magistrates who have lived criminally ... those who have freely shed the blood of others are now forced to shed their own ... Some lie unburied, food for the beasts and birds of the air. Others have been individually torn limb from limb."<sup>53</sup> The magistrates who overthrew Constantine's government were themselves overthrown. This is the point where Britain left the Empire - it was not the decision of Honorius' government, but of the Britons themselves.

We have the story from Zosimus:

The barbarians from beyond the Rhine, ravaging everything at will, drove both

<sup>51</sup> Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book IX.11, see [www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/artsou/sozom.htm](http://www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/artsou/sozom.htm)

<sup>52</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, Book 6, see John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 5, p78-82

<sup>53</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p45

the inhabitants of the British Isle and some of the peoples of Gaul to secede from the Empire of the Romans and to live in independence, no longer obeying the Roman Laws. The people of Britain, therefore, took up arms and braved every peril, freeing their cities from the attacking barbarians. And the whole of Armorica, and other provinces of Gaul, imitating the Britons, liberated themselves in like manner, expelling the Roman officials and setting up a civil policy according to their own inclination."<sup>54</sup>

Zosimus' account could hardly contrast more sharply with Gildas'.

### **Independent Britain**

Rome had failed to defend Britain from barbarian attacks. So the Britons took matters into their own hands and successfully organised their own defence. That's not how Gildas tells it. In Gildas' story the British had wickedly revolted from the Empire under Maximus, but then, deprived by their own folly of the troops necessary to defend themselves, they were subject to terrible raids from the Picts and Scots. So they sent envoys to Rome begging for rescue, "like frightened chicks huddled under the wings of their faithful parents"<sup>55</sup> and promising undying loyalty in return. And Rome did rescue them, twice, dispatching a force which effortlessly drove out the barbarian foe, before returning home again - for no Roman troops are ever actually stationed in Britain in Gildas' version of history.

Before departing after the first rescue the Romans instructed the Britons to build a fortification across the Island to keep out the northern raiders. This they did, but since it was turf and not stone - being the work of "a leaderless and irrational mob" - it did no good. So after the second rescue the Romans themselves oversaw the construction of a wall employing the usual method of construction, i.e. stone, financed by private and public funds **and built by forced labour** - Gildas states that specifically, as if it were a recommendation - and in addition built towers overlooking the sea along the south coast. But after this second victory the Romans informed the Britons they would not be coming to their aid a third time. Not that they were unable to assist; rather "they could not go on being bothered with such troublesome expeditions: the Roman standards, that great and splendid army, could not be worn out by land and sea for the sake of wandering thieves..." and so "they said goodbye, meaning never to return",<sup>56</sup> and sailed away. So when the Britons pleaded for assistance a third time - the letter to Aëtius - they had no reason to expect any, and they got none. In consequence they suffered another bout of dreadful devastation at the hands of their barbarian foes.

Gildas does indeed seem to have sources. His story is composed, like Geoffrey's, from a mosaic of historical fragments rearranged to form a specific pattern. There were two rescues of Britain lauded by Roman writers: not to say there were only two, but two, under Count Theodosius and Stilicho, were particularly celebrated. There were walls built across the island to defend the Roman province from the barbarians

<sup>54</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, Book 6 - trans. Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p108

<sup>55</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 17.1

<sup>56</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 15.3, 18.1, 18.3

outside the Empire, but they were built during the Roman occupation in the second century, not the fifth. There was a British usurper on the Continent at the time of Britain's exit from the Empire, but that was Constantine III, not Maximus. It is even true that there was a heresy at the back of it, dividing Christian brothers 'who had lived as one' - not Arianism but the home-grown Pelagian heresy. As for the cowardly Britons too gutless to defend themselves, this is a simple inversion of the truth. What was remarkable about post-Roman Britain was that she did defend herself against the barbarians, and successfully

Gildas does admit a British victory, but he puts it after the letter to Aëtius. First the Britons 'feebly wandered', suffering years of oppression and slaughter at the hands of barbarians as well as plagues and famines, before God finally gave them a victory which no human effort could grant them. Of course, Gildas is writing a sermon which his historical introduction is meant to illustrate, so the wicked British rebellion would have to be followed by divine punishment, not by immediate victory. However, some historians do credit Gildas' tale. J N L Myres, for example, seems prepared to credit the collapse of Britain's economy to subsistence level on the grounds that Gildas tells us the British were forced to rely on what could be got by hunting, there being no food remaining in the province. But then, these historians tend to take the same view as Gildas on the relative virtues of Roman and British rule, regarding the Roman Empire as the sole guarantor of peace and prosperity, if not precisely God's chosen world ruler.

This is not the only possible verdict on Roman rule, and we can deduce it was not the view of most Britons at the time. Some got their objections into the written record. A letter has survived from a Pelagian writer known as the Sicilian Briton, which comments cheerfully after Alaric's sack of Rome: "you tell me that everyone is saying that the world is coming to an end. So what? It happened before. Remember Noah's time ... but after the Flood, men were holier."<sup>57</sup> - which makes an interesting contrast to St Jerome's lament.

Britain seceded from the Rome Empire when a sizeable section of her elite lost all patience with the Roman government. Objections were not only practical, they were also ideological. Britain was, according to Roman accounts, the birthplace of the Pelagian heresy whose theology was deeply sympathetic to the plight of the poor.

And the plight of the poor, under Roman rule, was indeed desperate. The peasantry, that is the bulk of the conquered populations who were never invited to partake of Roman citizenship, were taxed into absolute destitution. Every time an opportunity arose, naturally they revolted - indeed so frequent were these revolts they were given a special name, *Bacauda*. The Roman authorities denounced their participants, the *bacaudae*, as bandits. But even the most ardent Roman partisans among historians are prepared to admit the peasants had a case. E A Thompson, for example, who insists the intellectual life of Britain ceased completely in the absence of Rome, tells us "What brought the *Bacaudae* into existence is no mystery: the main cause of the disaffection of the rural poor was the severity of the taxes and the corrupt

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<sup>57</sup> see John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p23, *Arthurian Period Sources*, vol. 3, p133

methods of the tax collectors and also the skill of the rich landowners in obliging the rural poor to pay the landowner's taxes as well as their own."<sup>58</sup> And in the case of Britain: "The revolt and the secession were an escape from the crushing, stifling burden of taxation."<sup>59</sup>

Britain's rejection of Roman rule was, in Thompson's view, simply another *bacauda* revolt. Bishop Fastidius tells us some of the overthrown ruling elite fell victim to lynch mobs: "magistrates who have lived criminally ... have been individually torn limb from limb." Gildas' story of kings being anointed and then killed without any form of trial, so others more wicked could rule in their place, may refer to the same event. But Gildas gives us no clue as to what is really going on. 'Nennius' is much plainer: "Hitherto the Romans had ruled the British for 409 years. But the British overthrew the rule of the Romans, and *paid them no taxes*, and did not accept their kings to reign over them, and the Romans did not dare to come to Britain to rule anymore, for the British had killed their generals." And again: "But the British killed the Roman generals *because of the weight of the empire*" (my italics).<sup>60</sup>

If we were reliant on Gildas alone we would have no idea why or how Roman rule ended in Britain. 'Nennius', in contrast, presents us with a fragment of genuine history, preserved like a fly in amber, from the perspective of a class whose testimony seldom makes it into the written record. British tradition remembered the true character of Britain's exit from the Empire - and in contrast to most historians today, remembered it as a Good Thing.

### **The Roman Withdrawal**

Despite its obvious errors, Gildas' sermon has had a powerful influence on historians' view of the end of Roman Britain. Everyone knows, of course, that the great and splendid army did not sail away because Rome couldn't be bothered with Britain any more. But the idea of the 'withdrawal of the legions' is still with us. The conventional interpretation is that as the weakened empire came under increasing barbarian pressure, the more peripheral areas ceased to be a priority. Troops were needed to defend the centre, Rome had to retrench, and the distant province of Britain was abandoned. In fact, this never happened.

Certainly Rome withdrew troops to defend the central territories of the Empire, leaving Britain and the rest of the Gallic prefecture exposed to attack. But that does not imply a renunciation of authority. Britain may have been a distant province but she was also a wealthy one. The fact that Rome couldn't adequately defend her would hardly have struck Imperial officials as a good reason to renounce her tax revenue. And we have evidence, in flat contradiction to Gildas, that they did not.

We have the evidence of a sixth-century historian, Procopius, writing from Constantinople about events of Honorius' time: "Constantine, defeated in battle by Honorius, died with his sons. However the Romans never succeeded in recovering

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<sup>58</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p34

<sup>59</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p35

<sup>60</sup> Nennius, *British History*, 28. 30

Britain, but it remained from that time on under tyrants."<sup>61</sup> The term tyrant, in this period, meant usurper, a ruler not appointed or approved by the legitimate authorities. Procopius, in so designating the rulers of Britain, tells us Rome had not relinquished her authority over the province in the aftermath of Constantine's usurpation, nor indeed in his own day.

Closer in time is the *Notitia Dignitatum*, or List of Offices, an official document detailing all the senior civilian departments and army units throughout the Roman Empire. It was kept until the 420s, and Britain at that date was still included in the list. Collingwood suggests why: "Any government which had lost a frontier district, and had the smallest expectation of reclaiming it, would keep a record of its organisation as a matter of course."<sup>62</sup>

Recovery was a real possibility. The western Empire did not fall to Alaric in 410 AD. The Goths were never the massive threat that later legend has made them out to be, indeed the reaction of the Roman authorities demonstrates that, in their view, Gallic usurpers and *bacaudae* rebels were far more to be feared. And they were right. By 418 AD Alaric's Goths, now under Wallia, had entered the service of the Roman state as *foederati* - barbarian tribes settled within the Empire as allies, fighting for Rome but under their own native commanders. They were stationed in Aquitania. The only threat they could have been intended to counter there was another *bacauda* uprising. Aquitania bordered on Armorica, modern day Brittany, a *bacaudae* stronghold.

When Britain threw off the Roman yoke, Zosimus tells us, Gaul followed. The Roman Empire had lost control of much of the Gallic prefecture to invading barbarians and peasant rebels. But by 418 all Gaul, including Armorica, had been recovered, and Rome was in a position to consider the recovery of Britain.

Some historians think Britain may have been reoccupied, if only briefly. Jack Lindsay cites as evidence an entry in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, under the year 418: "In this year the Romans collected all the treasures which were in Britain and hid some in the earth so that no one afterwards could find them and some they took with them into Gaul." This sounds like a tax-raid. Perhaps 'Nennius' records the same event: "But the British killed the Roman generals, because of the weight of the empire, and later asked their help. The Romans came to bring help to the empire and defend it, and deprived Britain of her gold and silver and bronze, and all her precious raiment and honey, and went back in great triumph."

Rome may have retaken Britain, if only briefly. No Roman record confirms it. But it is certain that Rome continued to interfere in British affairs in the first part of the fifth century. And it is Roman interference that underlies the fatal invitation to the Saxons.

### **The Saxon Advent**

The first Saxons were invited into Britain. In Gildas' story, after the God-given victory over the Picts and Scots, Independent Britain basked in luxury and fell prey to every vice. Falsehood was preferred to truth, darkness desired instead of the sun, Satan was welcomed as an angel of light, and Kings were anointed then slain "with no

<sup>61</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, III.2.38

<sup>62</sup> R G Collingwood and J N L Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p296



enquiry into the truth"<sup>63</sup> to be replaced by others crueller than they. Inevitably God determined to correct his erring people. A rumour of impending barbarian attack caused the rulers of Britain, "the members of the council together with the proud tyrant" to invite the Saxons into Britain. Blinded by God, they invited to Britain "a people whom they feared worse than death even in their absence"<sup>64</sup> - though Gildas neglects to tell us why the Saxons were so feared, up to this point in his narrative the Britons have only been attacked by Picts and Scots.

'Nennius' account is both simpler and more informative: "Vortigern ruled in Britain, and during his rule he was under pressure, from fear of the Picts and the Irish, and of a Roman invasion, and, not least, from dread of Ambrosius. Then came three keels, driven into exile from Germany. ... Vortigern welcomed them and handed over to them the island ... called Thanet".<sup>65</sup>

The ruler of an ex-Roman province under threat of enemy attack recruits barbarians to fight for him: This is not an act of madness, it is a perfectly normal Late Roman practice, the recruitment of *foederati*. Are we to believe Gildas doesn't know this? The first contingent consisted of only three *keels*, or warships, as both Gildas and 'Nennius' agree. It was hardly an overwhelming threat.

Unlike Gildas, 'Nennius' gives us dates. Vortigern held empire in Britain in the consulship of Theodosius and Valentinian - which dates his accession to 425 AD, and the invitation to the Saxons was in the fourth year of his reign, in the consulship of Felix and Taurus, that is, 428. But since 'Nennius' is a ninth-century text, historians prefer to trust Gildas' account and place the Saxon advent some time after Aëtius' third consulship in 446 AD.

So Gildas had sources. But he is a secondary source for the fifth century and history is ideally written from contemporary sources. We do have one. A Gallic chronicler writing in 452 reports that in the year 441 "Britain, which had hitherto suffered various disasters, passed into the control of the Saxons."<sup>66</sup> The Saxons, to a continental observer, appeared to have mastered Britain before Aëtius' third consulship began.

Gildas error appears puzzling, but then it may not be an error. There are hints that, once again, he knows more than he chooses to say. He tells us the Saxons were recruited to fight the Picts and the Scots. And he tells us the Picts attacked from the north, the Scots, that is the Irish, from the west. Then he tells us the Saxons were positioned on the east coast. Why?

Actually the Saxons were positioned in the extreme south east of Britain, on the Kent coast. Bede tells us the English royal house of Kent traced its descent from Hengist, chief of the first Saxon migrants to Britain and leader of the Saxon revolt. 'Nennius' claims these first migrants were settled on Thanet. The only enemy they could have been intended to guard against, from that position, were other Saxons, or a Roman invasion from Gaul.

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<sup>63</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 21.4

<sup>64</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 23.2

<sup>65</sup> Nennius, *British History*, 31 (Vortigern is actually called Guorthigirnus in 'Nennius' text, but but he is better known under Bede's version of the name, which Morris here uses.

<sup>66</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p38

### **Vortigern and Ambrosius**

Procopius tells us independent Britain was ruled by tyrants, but no continental source names the rulers of Britain after Rome's departure. We have only native sources to go on. From Gildas we have Ambrosius Aurelianus, the leader of the British resistance. As for the proud tyrant responsible for inviting in the Saxons, Gildas does not name directly, 'Nennius' calls him Guorthigirinus, but he is best known by the name Bede gives him, Vortigern. The word literally translates as overlord, and it may not be a name at all but a nickname. John Morris suggests that a British tyrant who has gone down in history under his Celtic nickname probably enjoyed considerable support among the common people.

Before the consensus shifted, and fifth-century Britain was deemed too 'dark' a century for its political history to be attempted, it was widely accepted that these two were heads of rival political factions. Ambrosius Aurelianus was thought to be named for the ultra-orthodox Ambrose of Milan, St. Ambrose, the most powerful western churchman of his day (the primacy of the papacy was not then established, and Milan was then the residence of the western Emperor). St. Ambrose was the implacable opponent of Magnus Maximus, the British usurper, and the teacher of Augustine of Hippo, the principal opponent of the British heresiarch Pelagius. Thus the British Ambrosius was thought to be head of an orthodox, pro-Roman faction in Britain - an idea first mooted by John Rhys,<sup>67</sup> who suggested also that he was opposed by a certain Guitolin, head of an anti-Roman faction. This deduction is from 'Nennius', which tells us that Ambrosius and Guitolinus i.e. Vitalinus, fought each other at the battle of Wallop in 437 AD. But an Ambrosius active in the first half of the fifth century is unlikely to have been the same man as Gildas' champion against the Saxons. John Morris suggests the two are probably father and son - Gildas tells us Ambrosius' father had worn the purple. Members of the dynasty still held power in Gildas' day: " his descendants... have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence".<sup>68</sup> It is thought Aurelius Caninus, one of the five tyrants Gildas singles out for particular condemnation, might be Ambrosius Aurelianus' grandson.

Vortigern also left descendants among the later rulers of Britain. Both the royal house of Powys and of Builth and Gwerthrynion claimed descent from him. Genealogies associate him with the town of Gloucester, which was perhaps his seat, and with the name Vitalinus - the Guitolinus who fought Ambrosius at Wallop may be a relative, or it may be Vortigern himself. The Pillar of Eliseg, an inscription stone set up in the ninth century by Concenn of Powys, makes Vortigern the son-in-law of Magnus Maximus.

This is not a claim Dark Age historians are prepared to take seriously, although there is plenty of precedent for such dynastic marriages. Constantius Chlorus, when elevated to the post of Caesar to Emperor Maximian, married Maximian's daughter. It was part of the arrangement: Diocletian's Caesar, Galerius, became his son-in-law at

<sup>67</sup> John Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, p103-4

<sup>68</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 25.3

the same time. Aëtius, allying himself with the Goths against the Huns, married a Gothic princess. Marriage in this period played a major role in the formation of alliances and in the transfer of power. For the Spanish general Maximus, marrying his offspring into the British princely families would be a perfectly normal means to consolidate his position. The Welsh tradition is late, but it is not ludicrous<sup>69</sup> - unlike much of Gildas' account.

David Dumville mocks the Dark Age British tradition of Maximus: "He appears both as the last Roman emperor in Britain and as the first ruler of an independent Britain, from whom all legitimate power flowed - a pleasing irony, in view of his actual history as a usurper."<sup>70</sup> He misses the point: one man's usurper is another man's legitimate ruler, and Maximus, in British tradition, was the epitome of legitimacy. Gildas, in Dumville's view, is the source of this nonsense: it was Gildas who first emphasised Maximus' historical role; the later British tradition, which 'emerges' in the ninth century, merely followed suit. This makes no sense. By what process would Gildas' villain, the ruination of Britain, be transformed into a hero and founding father of the nation? Even if Gildas were the only tradition available to the ninth-century Welsh antiquarian scholars, as opposed to the only sixth-century British text extant today, from Gildas' brief cast of characters Maximus is hardly the likeliest candidate for them to select. Ambrosius, last of the Romans and saviour of the nation, as Gildas portrays him, would have been the natural choice, or if his dates were too late, his parents, who had 'worn the purple' and died in the Saxon revolt, were surely regal and heroic enough to serve. And why did Gildas select Maximus as the villain in his story of the End of Roman Britain? Surely Constantine III, whom he prefers not to mention, was the obvious choice for this role.

The more logical possibility, which would make sense of both Gildas and the British tradition, is that the ninth-century concept of Maximus was extant in Gildas' period, and he wrote in opposition to it. Maximus was recognised as a legitimate emperor, and Gildas recalls the imperial insignia "which he was never fit to bear".<sup>71</sup> Why mention it? It would hardly suit Gildas' polemical purpose to draw attention to this symbol of Maximus' legitimacy if its existence were not already well known, and significant, to his readers. Later British rulers, tracing their descent from Maximus, were claiming precisely that they were not tyrants but were as legitimate as he. Gildas' evidence implies there were rulers in his day, perhaps among the tyrants he castigates, who made the same claim.

Britain did not degenerate into political chaos after the breach with Rome. Continental sources tell us she was ruled by tyrants, that is, illegitimate emperors. Gildas confirms this: it was a proud tyrant and his council, an organised British government, who recruited the first Saxon *foederati*. Bishop Fastidius' letter indicates a brief experiment with republicanism in the immediate aftermath of the 410 rebellion, but in little more than a decade Britain had reverted to the tried and tested method of

<sup>69</sup> Maximus could even have had a daughter young enough to have married Vortigern, since it is recorded that his son Flavius Victor, whom he made co-emperor in 384 AD, was at that time still an infant.

<sup>70</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p180

<sup>71</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 13.1

electing local emperors. Whether or not Vortigern was related, by blood or marriage, to Emperor Maximus, he genuinely was heir to the British usurpers, rulers of the Gallic prefecture; and so he must have appeared to contemporaries. John Morris suggests he may even have used the title *Imperator Caesar Augustus*.

Continental sources do not name Vortigern or Ambrosius, but they are not entirely silent on the subject British politics in the period. 'Nennius' tells us Vortigern went in fear of a Roman invasion. If Vortigern were a Pelagian, then continental writers confirm that he had cause to fear. For Rome could not, did not, ignore the British Pelagians.

### **The Roman Missions**

In 418 Rome regained Gaul from the *bacaudae* revolutionaries. In the same year Pelagius and his followers were hereticised on the grounds that their theology encouraged revolt among the lower orders. This was the culmination of a campaign waged against the British preacher by his arch-enemy Augustine. The decision came from the Emperor, the pope endorsed it, but the Church as a whole did not immediately fall into line. In 425, the year of Vortigern's accession, the Pelagian bishops of Gaul were ordered to publicly renounce their errors or face the displeasure of the prefect. In 429 the first mission against the British Pelagians set sail.

We have a contemporary account. Prosper of Aquitaine's *Chronicle* records for that year: "Agricola, son of the Pelagian bishop Severianus corrupts the churches of Britain by insinuating his doctrine. But at the suggestion of the deacon Palladius, Pope Celestine sends Germanus bishop of Auxerre as his representative, and after the confusion of the heretics guides the Britons to the Catholic faith."

Prosper is not our only source. Constantius of Lyons towards the end of the century wrote a biography of St. Germanus, thought to be based on the eye-witness testimony of Lupus, bishop of Troyes, a noted Gallic scholar and Germanus' companion on his first mission. Constantius tells of two missions, but dates neither. In addition Prosper tells of a third mission, led by Palladius. All three missions were a resounding success, according to these sources. This is plainly not the unvarnished truth, as a first successful mission would remove necessity for the other two.

Britain was now outside the Empire, but Rome could not ignore the British Pelagians. Their existence must give comfort to recusants in Gaul, and might encourage the *bacaudae*. There could be no division between religion and politics in this era, or between religion and military affairs. Bishop Germanus was a *dux*, a military official, before his ordination. Constantius says that during his first visit he led British troops to a bloodless victory against raiding Picts and Saxons. Returning after his second visit he reported, not to the Pope in Rome, but to the Emperor in Ravenna. In short, Germanus was a statesman, and an important one at that. His involvement illustrates the importance that British affairs still had for the Roman authorities, as does Palladius' visit.

According to Prosper's *Chronicle* Palladius, ordained by pope Celestine, was sent in 431 as the first Bishop to the Irish who believe in Christ. And it is Prosper who

betrays the real purpose of the visit: “Nor was he (Pope Celestine) less persistent in freeing the Britons from the same disease as certain men, Enemies of Grace,<sup>72</sup> had taken possession of the land of their birth; and he drove them from their lair of Ocean and ordained a bishop for the Irish, so that while he took zealous steps to keep the Roman island Catholic he also made the barbarian island Christian.” The real purpose of the new Irish bishopric was to attack the British Pelagians. Pope Celestine could not impose a bishop on an established British see (the election of bishops was still a local matter at this point in Church history) so he created a new post to be filled by an anti-Pelagian. This Palladius is doubtless the same man whom Prosper credits with putting Germanus name forward a few years earlier. As a deacon who had the pope’s ear he was plainly an important individual, and as John Morris points out, for a prominent church official to be sent to convert the barbarians would be highly unusual.

Prosper would have us believe that this second mission was also an unqualified success, and the ‘Enemies of Grace’ were driven from their British lair. Yet there was a third. Constantius doesn’t date Germanus’ later visit. Historians have generally placed it in the 440s. But Thompson has shown this is not so.<sup>73</sup>

According to Constantius, Germanus left Britain for the last time in the spring of the last year of his life. The returning saint, landing in Gaul, was immediately met by a deputation of Armoricans: That province was once again engaged in a *bacauda*, Aëtius had sent the Alan *foederati* to crush the rebels, and the deputation came to plead with Germanus to save the situation. Germanus succeeded in checking the Alan commander and proceeded on to the emperor in Ravenna, where he would certainly have secured a royal pardon had not the Armoricans perversely renewed the revolt. Germanus died in Italy, in July, and the rebels soon after ‘paid the penalty’. Constantius names the *bacauda* leader, Tibatto - and the Gallic chronicler tells us Tibatto was captured in 437. So, it was in the spring of 437 that Germanus left Britain - the same year, ‘Nennius’ tells us, that Ambrosius fought Guitolinus at Wallop.

All three Roman missions must fall within the reign of Vortigern, though the continental sources which tell of them never mention his name. Indeed Constantius’ biography very conspicuously avoids giving any hint of the nature of ecclesiastical or secular authority in Britain, or of Germanus’ relations to either, which is odd, as he is most informative about his hero’s interactions with the authorities in Gaul and Italy. But in British tradition Germanus and Vortigern are doubly linked: on the Pillar of Eliseg their association is amicable, in ‘Nennius’ they are deadly enemies. But this ties in with Constantius’ biography.

On Germanus’ first visit, he tells us the saint led the British forces in battle. Historians generally accept this was a real event, but a visiting Roman official could hardly have put himself at the head of British troops without the consent of Vortigern’s government. At this stage the implication is that Roman ambassador and the British ruler were united against a pagan enemy, just as the Powys inscription presents them.

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<sup>72</sup> Enemies of Grace is a Roman designation for the Pelagian opponents of Augustine’s novel theology, see below, Chapter 7.2, *Pelagius and Augustine*.

<sup>73</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, chapter 7

There is no trace of any such alliance in 'Nennius'. Instead there is a legend in which Germanus overthrows the wicked ruler and destroys him utterly, calling down a fire from heaven upon him which burns him up in his own fortress. The legend suggests a breach between the two during Germanus' second visit, though the saint plainly did not destroy the sinner. Vortigern must still be in power after Germanus' exit, and after Wallop, for it was he who faced the Saxon revolt in 441.

The consequence of the Roman missions, each and every time, we're told, was a resounding success for the Roman party. Plainly it wasn't. Rome's propagandists put the best gloss they can on it, but the lack of detail gives the game away. Pope Celestine sent some Pelagians into exile, Prosper appears to claim - but he doesn't say who they were, where they were sent, or who enforced the expulsion. Constantius' account, which is much more detailed, also mentions British exiles whom he says were sent to the Continent, but still we don't know who they were. He does name a British ruler, Elafius, but who Elafius was or where he ruled we can't guess - no other text mentions this man. Germanus roamed the country preaching openly in public places, but no British synod met with him to condemn Pelagius and endorse the Roman communion, for Constantius would surely have told us if they had. Indeed, Germanus is never said to have met with any British bishop in either of his visits, though Constantius claims it was in response to a request from the British themselves that Germanus was sent in the first place - by a synod of Gallic bishops unrecorded in any other source. Prosper, in contrast, tells us Germanus was sent by the pope. **The only logical deduction from the evidence is that the Roman missions failed.** When Germanus left these shores for the last time the British Church was still Pelagian.

Gildas omits the entire affair.

### **The Saxon Revolt**

Only four years later, according to the Gallic Chronicler, Britain passed into the control of the Saxons.

This is not the story we get from Gildas. He tells us the third British appeal for Roman assistance against the Picts and Scots was addressed to Aëtius, consul for the third time. That appeal was unsuccessful, but with God's help the British won a victory themselves, and then followed a period of peace and prosperity and with it the inevitable descent into vice, then a rumour of the barbarians' return, and only then were the Saxons invited into the country. The initial three keels were later reinforced, and granted additional supplies which "for a long time 'shut the dog's mouth'." So the proud tyrant's Saxon *foederati* did not revolt for years or even decades after the letter to Aëtius, if we are to believe Gildas' story.

The letter to Aëtius appears to be genuine - the style is so unlike Gildas' own that it does look like an actual quotation: "The barbarians push us back to the sea, the sea pushes us back to the barbarians: between these two kinds of death, we are either drowned or slaughtered." But this letter - or at any rate, the part of it Gildas' quotes - does not name the threatening barbarians. It is Gildas who tells us they are the Picts

and Scots.

One or the other, the Gallic Chronicler or Gildas, has to have the story wrong. Gildas knows of no Saxons in Britain before the middle of the century. The Gallic Chronicler thinks Britain is in the power of the Saxons at the time he writes. Historians generally place the greatest reliance on contemporary sources. Here they make an exception. The majority opinion among Dark Age historians dates the Saxon advent, and the revolt, to the second half of the fifth century.

Historians generally place the greatest reliance on contemporary sources because although a contemporary writer may not be telling us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he may be mistaken and he will certainly have his own bias, still there are facts which someone writing at the time cannot misrepresent without his entire readership knowing he is lying. If the Saxons did not take Britain in 441 AD then the Gallic Chronicler is talking nonsense, and his entire contemporary readership would have known it. For we cannot assume, at this stage, that the literate public of Gaul were now so entirely ignorant of British affairs that they might mistakenly believe the Saxons had taken over Britain when in fact they hadn't yet arrived. Some historians do postulate a complete severance of communications between Britain and the Continent in the later fifth century. This entry of the Gallic Chronicler is the last notice we have from continental historians on insular British affairs. But communications were not severed at this time. It was only in 437 that Germanus returned from a diplomatic mission to Britain, reporting to the Emperor in Ravenna, and someone wrote to Aëtius during or after his third consulship. So either the Gallic Chronicler is making up a story, a story none of his readers could possibly believe and for no reason we can imagine, or else Gildas is in error.

Gildas is not a historian. His *The Ruin of Britain* is a sermon. His story of independent Britain, indeed his entire history from the time of the Roman invasion on, proves to be factually incorrect in every instance where we can check it against contemporary Roman accounts. This entry of the Gallic Chronicler is the last point at which we can check it. Once again Gildas is wrong. The appeal to Aëtius was for assistance against the Saxons.

If Gildas were our prime source for the history of Britain from the end of Roman rule - that is, in Gildas' account, from the usurpation of Maximus - we would be a great deal more ignorant than we are. Fortunately, up to the mid-fifth century, we have better sources. And from then onwards Gildas isn't our only source. We also have 'Nennius', whose account of the first half of the century dovetails neatly with the Gallic Chronicler's dates. So why should we dismiss his account of the second half of the century? The *Historia Brittonum* may be only a ninth century text but clearly its author had sources, sources which preserved more of the real history of fifth-century Britain than Gildas knew - or than Gildas chose to report.

### **Britain's Recovery**

To the Gallic Chronicler and his contemporaries the Saxon revolt appeared to mark the end of the British experiment. But Britain rallied. No continental source tells the

story of the British recovery. It is even absent from some insular accounts (the Anglo Saxon chronicle portrays the English take-over as long, glorious conquest, with no setbacks, and no mention of Badon!) But there can be no doubt that it happened. Gildas is plainly writing in a Britain which the Saxons did not rule, and he is writing a century after the Saxon revolt.

For the story of the British recovery we have only two sources, Gildas and 'Nennius', and they tell completely different tales.

From Gildas we have, first, a story of total ruin, lovingly recounted. All the major towns of Britain were reduced to shattered ruins by fire and enemy battering rams, their entire populations slaughtered, church leaders and people alike, the streets left littered with holy alters and fragments of bodies all covered in a purple crust of congealed blood. All this, Gildas emphasises, is the inevitable price to be paid for resisting the will of God. As for the survivors: some surrendered to the enemy and were enslaved, some chose exile overseas, others held out in forests and high hills. Then finally, after the cruel plunderers had "gone home", God gave strength to survivors, and Ambrosius Aurelianus, "a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm", arose to lead them. A long struggle ensued, sometimes Britons, sometimes their pagan enemies were victorious, as God put his people, his "latter-day Israel", to the test. But at last the Britons were victorious. Badon was "pretty much the last defeat of the villains", and since then a generation has grown up with no memory of those desperate times, knowing "only the calm of the present".<sup>74</sup>

There is no Arthur in Gildas' story. It is 'Nennius' who tells us Badon was Arthur's victory. In 'Nennius', Gildas' hero, Ambrosius, fights only against Vortigern and has no role in the British resistance. Gildas' period of dreadful devastation is also absent from 'Nennius'; the British fight back starts immediately after the Saxon revolt. It is led by the sons of Vortigern

The Vortigern of the *Historia Brittonum* is not a sinner blinded by God, he is a traitor to his own nation. He falls in love with Hengest's beautiful daughter and gives her father Kent as her bride-price. But by the time of this marriage Vortigern already had grown sons, and it is his eldest son, Vortimer, who initiates the British resistance.

While Vortimer lives, British victory seems assured, but on his death things go badly wrong for the British. The Saxons who had been driven off return, treacherous Hengest proposes peace, the Britons in council agree, and a meeting is arranged. But the Saxons arrive armed, and on a prearranged signal they fall on the British, killing all three hundred of the 'king's seniors', sparing only Vortigern himself. To save his own life he is forced to cede them even more territory in the south east, namely Essex and Sussex.

'Nennius' breaks off to relate legendary accounts of Germanus' destruction of Vortigern, and of Vortigern's struggle against Emrys Gwledic, that is, Ambrosius. We learn of Vortigern's end, and of the fate of his descendants. When we return to the war, it is with Arthur's campaign. After Hengest's death, 'Nennius' tells us, his son Octa

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<sup>74</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 25.3, 26.1, 26.3



was made king of the Kentishmen, and Arthur fought against them in those days. 'Nennius' lists twelve battles which Arthur fought, the last of which is Badon.

Gildas and 'Nennius' arrive at the same place, but they get there by different routes. But is there any evidence to support either of them? There is no continental account of insular British history for the last half of the century, but that doesn't mean there is no confirmation of the native sources.

### **Riothamus**

As David Dumville reminds us, "only a highly attenuated form of history can be written from purely archaeological evidence."<sup>75</sup> But archaeology must have the right of veto. Gildas tells us all the major towns of Britain fell to the Saxon assault and were reduced to ruins. The archaeological evidence proves him wrong. Some towns fell: signs of devastation and slaughter have been discovered. Some appear to have escaped completely. Some were abandoned by their inhabitants without any sign of a struggle. Gildas' rhetoric is overblown.

But there was an exodus from Britain. In the second half of the fifth century, and beyond, so many Britons migrated overseas that they gave their names to the areas they settled. An area on the north coast of Spain became Britona. Normandy is littered with Brettevilles. The north western corner of Gaul, previously Armorica, was renamed Brittany.

But these were not all helpless refugees. The Gothic historian, Jordanes, writing in the mid-sixth century, records a British force twelve thousand summoned by the Emperor Anthemius to assist him in his fight against the Goths of Aquitaine.<sup>76</sup> Their leader was Riothamus. The name appears to mean 'most kingly', and may have been a title. Jordanes calls him a king. A letter survives addressed to this man from a Gallic nobleman, Sidonius Apollinaris, pleading on behalf of a 'penniless rustic' whose slaves have been enticed away by the Britons.<sup>77</sup> These armed Britons seem to have been recruited on the same basis as the German *foederati*, fighting under their own leaders and obeying their own laws.

There is no Riothamus in any insular record, but if this is a title he may appear under another name. There is no consensus among historians as to whether Riothamus and his men were already settled in Brittany, or came from insular Britain to fight for the Empire, though Jordanes has them arrive by ship. But most probably it would be the more Romanised section among the British, the wealthy magnates, who left the island for the mainland when the Roman cause appeared lost. Gildas says they took all the books away with them, and some historians seem inclined to accept this as fact, and as explanation for the errors in Gildas' history.

Riothamus and his force engaged the Goths in the year 469-70, and were annihilated, according to Jordanes. Another sixth-century historian, Gregory of Tours, locates the battle at the village of Dol, near Bourges.

<sup>75</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p192

<sup>76</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, XLV (238)

<sup>77</sup> This letter is reproduced on *Britannia.com*

## Vortimer

Gildas exaggerates. Doubtless it suits the purpose of his sermon to do so. The tragic ruin of all Britain, the lamenting exiles forced overseas singing psalms in place of shanties - "You have given us like sheep for eating and scattered us among the heathen"<sup>78</sup> - this is not the picture we get from the archaeological evidence or from continental sources. The exiles weren't so helpless. What of those left behind? It is entirely in character (that is, their character as defined by Gildas) for the British to get helplessly slaughtered when the barbarians attack, but it is out of keeping with the actual evidence of the nature of independent Britain as described by Roman writers. Decades earlier the Britons had organised their own defence against a barbarian threat Rome couldn't counter. Were they now incapable of opposing the Saxons? It doesn't seem likely. 'Nennius' says it wasn't so. He says a son of Vortigern led the British resistance.

Vortigern comes down in British tradition as Gildas presents him, the man who ruined his own nation by inviting the treacherous Saxons into the island. So he appears in Geoffrey's history, and in the *Historia Brittonum*. But this text preserves traces of an earlier view.

There is evidence that the damnation of Vortigern in British tradition dates from the ninth century. Before that he was a revered ancestor of the Powys and Builth-Gwerthrynion dynasties, and indeed the grandfather of a saint. His reputation, and his lineage, survived the Saxon revolt. Then it is likely that his power did too. 'Nennius' tells us it was Vortigern's son, Vortimer, who first led the British resistance. He lists the battles Vortimer fought, and he is not the only source to do so.

According to Gildas, Ambrosius rallied the Britons only after the cruel Saxons 'went home'. Where is home? Plainly he does not mean they went back to Germany, there was still a long war of resistance to be fought. According to 'Nennius', Vortigern established the first Saxon contingent on the island of Thanet, and **it is to Thanet that Vortimer expelled them, and three times besieged them there.**

**Before Ambrosius rallied the British, the Saxons had already gone home. By this admission Gildas gives a hint of confirmation to the *Historia's* account.** But there's more. 'Nennius' locates the three battles Vortimer fought against the Saxons: "The first battle was on the river Darenth. The second battle was at the ford called Episford in their language, Rhyd yr afael in ours, and there fell Horsa and also Vortigern's son Cateyrn. The third battle was fought in the open country by the Inscribed Stone on the shore of the Gallic sea. The barbarians were beaten and he was victorious. They fled to their keels and were drowned as they clambered aboard them like women."<sup>79</sup>

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lists three battles Hengest fought against the British in the space of a decade, at Aylesford, where Hengest's brother Horsa was slain, at Crayford, and near Wippedsfleet. John Morris argues these are the same three battles that 'Nennius' lists. Crayford is two miles from the junction of the Cray with the Darenth. Episford, which means Horseford, indicates a place where a major road

<sup>78</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 25.1

<sup>79</sup> Nennius, *British History*, 44

crosses a river, which is the situation of Aylesford. Wippedsfleet, the estuary or inlet of Wipped is likely to be the Wansum channel at Richborough, between Thanet and the mainland. The most prominent monument in Roman Richborough was a huge marble arch, 'the Inscribed Stone by the Gallic sea': Fragments of its inscription still survive. As Morris says, the two accounts correspond too closely for coincidence, and as each names the battles in their own tongue neither is likely to have copied from the other. Then the connection between them is not literary, it's real, the battles actually occurred, and were important enough to be remembered on both sides. The initial British resistance was led by Vortigern's faction.

The undoing of Vortimer's achievement, the peace conference at which the British notables were treacherously slain, is not confirmed by any source outside the *Historia Brittonum*. But it is not impossible, or even improbable. Similar tales are told by Roman historians. Zosimus, for example, tells how, during the reign of Theodosius the Great, a large number of Scythians, resident in various towns in the east and perceived to be a threat by the Roman officials, were invited to gather in their respective market squares to receive gifts and honours from a grateful emperor. It was a trick. Soldiers were stationed on the roofs surrounding them, and at a signal rained missiles down on them, killing every man. "Thus were the eastern cities delivered from their apprehensions."<sup>80</sup> Massacre is at times an effective political tool.

But Nennius' story may be legendary. Still, there must have been some event sufficiently catastrophic to cause the eclipse of the Vortigern faction and its replacement by the Roman party.

### **The Last of the Romans**

The leader of the British resistance, according to Gildas, was Ambrosius Aurelianus, perhaps the only Roman to have survived the Saxon assault. Historians do not usually require confirmation of Gildas' story; his word is quite good enough for most of them. But in fact there is confirmation.

The evidence lies, not in archaeology or in documentation, but in place names. There are a number of place names in England which begin with the prefix Ambros, or Ambres. This root word is not English, and their distribution is not random. John Morris suggests they originate in the Late Roman practice of naming army units from the emperors who raised them. The Honoriaci were named from Honorius, the Theodosiani from Theodosius. Troops raised by Ambrosius would, following the same pattern, be named Ambrosiaci. If they went on to name the areas they were stationed, or which they had retaken, we can explain their distribution: "Half of these places are suitably sited to defend Colchester and London against Kent and the East Angles, and three more border on South Saxon territory. Several of them are earthworks. If garrisons were there stationed, they were established when the Thames basin was securely held".<sup>81</sup> Ambrosius did play a role in the British fight-back.

Ambrosius is one of only eight individuals named, and the only British leader praised, in Gildas' entire historical section. Yet Gildas has little to tell us about his

<sup>80</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, Book 4

<sup>81</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p100

hero. He was not actually a Briton but a Roman, his parents had worn the purple and died in the Saxon revolt, the British resistance was entirely due to his leadership, his descendants, “greatly inferior to their grandfather’s excellence”, did not, apparently, retain his pre-eminent position. Gildas doesn’t even tell us that Ambrosius led the British resistance to its climax, or that he fought at Badon. And that means there is no contradiction between Gildas’ account and that of ‘Nennius’.

British tradition remembered Ambrosius. His rivalry with Vortigern was transcribed into legend, and preserved in the *Historia Brittonum*. A gloss in that work refers to him as Emrys ‘Guletic’, Emrys the Overlord, the same title Welsh legend gave to the Emperor Maximus. ‘Nennius’ admits his authority over a surviving son of Vortigern: “Pascent, who ruled the two countries called Builth and Gwerthrynion after his father’s death, by permission of Ambrosius, who was the great king among all the kings of the British nation.” Yet British tradition did not remember Ambrosius as the leader of the British resistance. The entire British people, throughout all the lands they occupied, and as far back as the record will take us, reverently placed Arthur in that role.

### **Emperor Arthur**

Gildas and ‘Nennius’ tell completely different tales of the British resistance, but they finally meet at the same place: Badon. Here, their stories do not contradict each other, and if both writers are credited we have a Roman Arthur, heir to Ambrosius, a last *Comes Britanniae* fighting to preserve the remnants of Empire in the one western province that successfully resisted the encroaching Germans. It is this Arthur that historians from John Rhys to John Morris have argued in favour of. David Dumville mocks this as a medieval view. And so it is. William of Malmesbury came to the same conclusion back in the twelfth century, about a decade before Geoffrey wrote his history: “On the death of Vortimer, the strength of the Britons grew faint, their diminished hopes went backwards; and straightway they would have come to ruin, had not Ambrosius, the sole survivor of the Romans, who was monarch of the realm after Vortigern, repressed the overweening barbarians through the distinguished achievements of the warlike Arthur.”<sup>82</sup> William of Malmesbury is still credited as the greatest historian of his age. But William accepted the *Historia Brittonum* as an historical source, and today’s historians, after Morris’ *The Age of Arthur*, do not.

For the aftermath of Badon Gildas is, unarguably, our primary source. He is a contemporary witness, the only one we have. There is no voice to counter his account of Britain in the first half of the sixth century, nothing in the continental record, in English tradition, or in any British source. ‘Nennius’, after the account of Arthur’s victories, turns to Saxon genealogies and the later sixth-century battle for the north. For this period we have only Gildas’ testimony, and what he describes is a Roman revival.

Gildas has nothing good to say about his own people. British rule is by definition bad. Virtuous rule is reserved for the Romans. It was a Roman who led the British to victory against the pagan Saxons, and the Saxon threat has not since revived. The country is going to the dogs, but that has come about as a generation has grown up

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<sup>82</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum* - see E K Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, p16-17

which does not remember the chastisement of the Saxon revolt. In the immediate aftermath of Badon, “kings, public and private persons, priests and churchmen, kept to their proper stations.” If Gildas is to be believed, Badon was a Roman victory, and the post-Badon government was likewise Roman.

Britain had not collapsed into anarchy in Gildas’ day. Much as he disapproves of it, he is the evidence for that government’s survival. His sermon is an attack on the lay and ecclesiastical rulers of his day. They could hardly be attacked if they didn’t exist, or denounced for their abuses if they were powerless. Gildas testifies to the existence of an intact, operative authority structure. Britain has her priests, ministers and clerics, he tells us. She has her judges and her kings. Mightiest among them, and Gildas’ chief target, is Maglocunus, Maelgwn of Gwynedd, whom he addresses as “dragon of the island”.

The dragon was an imperial symbol, figured in purple on standards borne before Emperors, according to John Rhys.<sup>83</sup> The Welsh adopted the symbol, as they adopted the concept. Roman rule ceased in Britain, but the rule of Emperors did not. Sometimes they were called Kessarogion, Caesarians, sometimes Gwledics, overlords. The dragon was their symbol. Legend associates it with Ambrosius, and with Arthur. Gildas associates it with Maglocunus, whom the King of kings has made “higher than almost all the generals of Britain”.

“Britain is a province fertile of tyrants”, Gildas reminds us of the Roman opinion, quoting the pagan Porphyry. Even before she left the Empire Britain was accustomed to elevating Emperors. After Constantine III her nominees no longer claimed dominion over the Gallic prefecture, but they were, in their own eyes, heirs to that imperial dignity. The concept of a British Emperor remained alive in these islands in later centuries. It was passed on to the Saxons, who coined their own term for it, Bretwalda, ruler of Britain. The term first appears in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, where it is applied to King Egbert of Wessex, and to seven others before him whom Bede credited with holding *imperium*. Bede’s list begins with Aelle of Sussex and ends with Oswy of Northumbria. His fifth is Edwin of Northumbria, whose royal dignity was such that a standard was carried before him at all times; even when he walked through the streets he was proceeded by one of the type “known to the Romans as a Tufa”,<sup>84</sup> apparently a winged globe.

John Morris suggests that it is significant that the concept of an Emperor, other than the Roman Emperor, survived in the British Isles alone. Elsewhere in the Christian world, after the fifth century, the title was only ever used of Emperors of Byzantium until the western Empire was revived in the person of Charlemagne. But all the nations of Britain used this title for their overkings. Bede avoids the personal title; his overkings ‘held empire’. But **Oswald of Northumbria, sixth on his list, was styled *imperator* by seventh-century Irish writers**, and they used the same title for the high kings of Ireland. Brian Boru, who recovered Ireland from the Vikings, claimed the title for himself. It was used of the Mercian kings when they held dominion over all the English kingdoms; a

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<sup>83</sup> John Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, p133

<sup>84</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.16

charter survives in which the last of them so styles himself.<sup>85</sup> And Arthur, in later British tradition, is styled Emperor, in Welsh *Amherawdyr*.

In John Rhys' view Arthur was the last *Comes Britanniae*, the highest office in the now independent province and hence an emperor in the eyes of his subjects. John Morris sees him as both the last Roman Emperor of the west and the first medieval king of what was to become England. In intention he was Roman: "Arthur's government had only one possible and practicable aim, to restore and revive the Roman Empire in Britain".<sup>86</sup> Gildas praises the attempt, though it was by now doomed. But, Morris argues, it didn't have to be that way. Despite the absence of direct Roman rule, Britain's degeneration and ultimate defeat was not inevitable. It was the fall of northern Gaul to the Franks in 486, and the emigration of so many of her own fighting men to the Continent under the leadership of the most Romanised section of the elite, that undid the efforts of Arthur and Ambrosius. Had circumstances not overtaken the victorious British, they might have "permanently upheld in Britain a western state as Roman as the empire of the east, ruled from a London as imperial as Constantinople."<sup>87</sup> Under such provocation Dark Age historians decided they could dispense with Arthur altogether.

### **The Figure of Arthur**

All the British races, from as far back as we can trace, insisted Arthur had led them to victory against the Saxons. They were all wrong, Dumville tells us. The constructions of historians since the start of Celtic scholarship up to the time of Morris' Age of Arthur are also nonsense. We have to start again, and this time, before we even approach the evidence, we must have ready the right questions to ask of it. The question most lay people would like to see answered, 'did King Arthur exist? was there a real man behind the myth?', does not figure in his list.

Historians following in his wake have gone further. Oliver Padel specifies that the question "was there an historical Arthur?", the "natural question", he terms it, must not be asked. It distorts our interpretation of the evidence since it forces us to reply "yes, perhaps". This is not the answer we want.<sup>88</sup>

But if, as Padel holds, the evidence itself would not naturally suggest this question to us, why do we ask it? Why is it the natural question? Because British tradition tells us Arthur did exist, and played a significant role in our history. It is not enough to say that this tradition is too late to count as evidence for Arthur's period. We still have to account for its existence.

This is exactly what Richard Barber set out to do back in 1971, in *The Figure of Arthur*. His thesis has been taken up and elaborated by others,<sup>89</sup> but the original is still the clearest exposition. Barber wrote, as he says, to refute the 'champions of

<sup>85</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p329

<sup>86</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p117

<sup>87</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p507

<sup>88</sup> O J Padel, *The Nature of Arthur* in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (Summer) 1994, pp 1-31 - see Thomas Green, *The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur*, p10

<sup>89</sup> particularly N J Higham *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*

Camelot', whose opinion was in danger of being accepted for want of a challenger. He argues that the Arthur accepted for most of the twentieth century, the Romano-British general fighting the barbarian invaders of Britannia, was a figment of the historical imagination. Faced with a vacuum in British history, a plausible lay character had to be invented to fill it, a character which reflected our own values and concerns. So we invented an Arthur who fought to preserve what we hold to be of value, a "last heroic bearer of the flame of Roman civilization against the black barbarian night".<sup>90</sup>

And that process of inventing Arthur did not begin in the twentieth century. Arthur has always been recreated afresh in the image of his creators. This was true from the very start, when Nennius (Barber here accepts his authorship) wrote the *Historia Brittonum*. And this is the start, in Barber's view: the earliest securely dated text to mention Arthur must be the first to have ever been written. So it was Nennius who invented Arthur, and he did so to serve the needs of his own time and place.

The ninth century was a time of Welsh revival. For centuries isolated by their refusal to come into the Roman fold, under constant military threat from their Saxon neighbours and divided against themselves in small, warring principalities, the Welsh had degenerated culturally, intellectually and militarily prior to Nennius' period. But in finally in 768 the Welsh Church had accepted the Roman dating of Easter, and progress was again possible. In the ninth century a new and energetic dynasty came to power in Gwynedd. Merfyn Vrych was descended from Maglocunus on his mother's side, but his father was from the north. On taking the throne he began the process of uniting Wales by conquest, a task continued by his son Rhodri Mawr, Rhodri the Great. It was Rhodri who in 855 won a notable victory over the Vikings, recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* - his fame was known beyond his own shores.

In the ninth century Welsh isolation was over. The enlarged kingdom of Gwynedd, now respectably Roman, was in close and stimulating contact with Ireland and with Frankish Gaul. It enjoyed a cultural revival and an enormous increase in prestige and confidence. Even the reconquest of parts of Saxon-held Britain now seemed possible, with the once-mighty kingdom of Mercia in terminal decline. But what the new dynasty lacked was a written history, a history which would justify its own rise to power and the territorial expansion now in prospect. And so, Barber surmises, the patriot Nennius invented the earliest British history, adapting Frankish and Roman legends to give the British a pedigree that stretched back to Noah, via Troy. Where Gildas saw the Britons as inept heirs of Rome, Nennius' inventions made them a separate nation. And it was Nennius who gave them their national hero, Arthur.

Nennius had his sources. They were mostly northern, as the new dynasty came from the north, and in them Nennius found a genuine Arthur, an obscure Irish prince, a son or grandson of King Aedan of Dal Riada. Arthur of Dal Riada gave Nennius his starting-point for the new British hero. Transposing this character back in time, and uniting him with Badon, the victory briefly mentioned in Gildas' account of the British resistance, Nennius gave the Britons what they lacked, a victorious war-leader and a glorious past, and thus the hope, and the justification, of a still more glorious future.

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<sup>90</sup> Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p17-18

As Barber admits, his objective is to explain away the Arthur of British historical tradition, and this is probably as good a theory as can be imagined for that purpose. It is full of holes.

The first is Nennius' surprising lack of invention. His section on Arthur consists of a mere list of battles, occupying no more than half a page in Morris' translation. The story of Vortigern in this text is about fifteen times as long, detailing the tyrant's legendary struggles with St Germanus and with Ambrosius/Emrys, his relations with the Saxons, and the fate of his sons and grandsons. Arthur, in contrast, appears out of nowhere, fights twelve battles, and disappears as abruptly. It is hard to see how a king of Gwynedd who commissioned his tame scholar to create a mighty British hero could have been satisfied with this brief fragment - the more so when Nennius makes no attempt to relate the new hero to Gwynedd's new, ambitious dynasty.

For Nennius does not supply Arthur with a genealogy, though genealogy figures large in his history. He even opens the Arthur section with a genealogical statement about Arthur's opponents, yet never a word on Arthur's own origins. David Dumville seems to regard this as evidence against Arthur, dismissing him as "a man without position or ancestry in pre-Geoffrey Welsh sources". **But being ahistorical has never prevented anyone from having ancestors or descendants.** The god Woden was ancestor to many of the Saxon dynasties. Julius Caesar was descended from the goddess Venus. The kings of Kent claimed descent from Hengest and Horsa - both of whom are mythical, according to the current historical consensus, though they still have ancestors of their own, going back either to Woden, or to a son of God, Geta (Nennius, recording this genealogy, assures us this God was not the God of Gods, but one of the idols they worshipped). The kings of Powys claimed descent from Maximus, via his daughter Severa, who married Vortigern. Dark Age historians find the claim laughable. The genealogies of this dark period, they assure us, are not to be taken seriously, for they were invented to satisfy political need. And Nennius invented Arthur to serve the needs of the kings of Gwynedd. But he invented for him no noble ancestors and no succeeding line. If Arthur were to serve the ambitions of Gwynedd's new dynasty, he could do that best as a mighty ancestor, and that could have been arranged with the flick of a pen. If Barber's theory were correct, Nennius' reticence is baffling.

More puzzling still is how this scant invention of Nennius' could have sparked the mighty legend, believed in Geoffrey's day by all the British peoples with a passion verging on religious devotion. If Arthur were only invented in the ninth century, when the Britons had already diverged into separate nations, then to adopt him as their national hero these separate nations would each have to get rid of whatever national history they treasured before his invention.

This problem seems not to have occurred to anti-Arthur historians because their own devotion to the strictly textual evidence blinds them to the fact that 'history', for most people throughout most of recorded time, was not written, it was oral. The fact that a people have not left us with a record does not mean they themselves had no idea of their own history. This is not history as academics define it. It is history as it



was understood in the medieval and ancient world, a story about the past. An elementary knowledge of psychology shows that everyone has a personal history, a story about themselves that describes them to themselves, without which they would mentally disintegrate. The same is true of nations, indeed, this is how nations exist as nations. In the words of R H C Davis: "What no nation can be without is an image or myth with which it can identify itself."<sup>91</sup> "No people can be a nation unless it can project itself into timelessness by linking its history to a particular land, and it has no chance of doing that unless it believes the link to be true."<sup>92</sup> The story of Arthur linked the British people to the island of Britain, and defined them as a people, as the island's rightful inhabitants. But in Barber's theory it did not do so before the ninth century, by which time the British had divided into separate and frequently hostile kingdoms.

If the Arthur legend originated in ninth-century Gwynedd, and spread from there to the rest of the British kingdoms, it did so at the expense of the histories these people already cherished. How the Bretons, the Cornish, and even Gwynedd's deadly enemies in Dyfed were persuaded to discard their traditional histories and adopt in their place a propaganda hero invented to serve the interests of that north Welsh kingdom, is difficult to imagine. That they could have done so on the basis of a couple of paragraphs in a Latin text is simply incredible.

The writer of the *Historia Brittonum* cannot be responsible for the Arthur legend. Barber's theory cannot stand. We could theorise that some earlier creative talent was responsible for its creation and spread, but we would have to do so on the basis of no evidence whatsoever. And we would be doing so with only one purpose in mind, to get rid of Arthur, not to explain the data we are faced with.

The most likely explanation for an Arthur revered by all the British peoples is that someone of that name, or someone remembered under that name, really did exist and played the role assigned to him in British tradition. For there was a successful British resistance and, since military victories are not won by committees, someone must have led it.

### **What's in a name?**

The case for Arthur is the entire British tradition, late, fragmented and mythologised though it may be. The case against Arthur is derived from Gildas' sermon - one text, one man's voice. And that text has to be selectively interpreted.

If we accept the evidence of Gildas then we must accept the reality of a British victory which culminated at Badon. Later British tradition, dating back at least to the ninth century, claimed Badon was Arthur's victory. Gildas does not mention Arthur, but since Gildas names only two individuals from the fifth century, Ambrosius Aurelianus and Aëtius, this cannot logically be viewed as evidence against his existence. But in the eyes of J N L Myres, it is absolutely conclusive evidence: "It is inconceivable that Gildas, with his intense interest in the outcome of a struggle that he believed had been decisively settled in the year of his own birth, should not have mentioned Arthur's

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<sup>91</sup> R H C Davis, *The Normans and their Myth*, p49

<sup>92</sup> R H C Davis, *The Normans and their Myth*, p59

part in it had that part been of any political consequence.”<sup>93</sup> But Gildas did not mention Constantine the Great, Constantine III, Pelagius and Germanus either. Is this because he was not intensely interested in the Roman Empire’s role in the spread of Christianity, or in Britain’s unfortunate tendency towards heresy and rebellion? Clearly not.

Since Gildas neither mentions Arthur nor names the victor of Badon, there is no conflict between his story and the later British tradition. But, says Thomas Green, Gildas does name the victor of Badon, Ambrosius Aurelianus, a fact that has been obscured by modern translations of his sermon. In *The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur*, published on the internet, Green calls on the authority of Oliver Padel, who “has returned to the original manuscript ... and has been able to show that the break evident in Winterbottom’s edition (1978) has no manuscript authority”, and that with this break removed Badon “reads naturally as the victory that crowned the career of Ambrosius Aurelianus”.<sup>94</sup> The break in question is, presumably, the paragraph division in Winterbottom’s translation, which leaves Ambrosius Aurelianus in one paragraph and Badon in the next. Paragraph divisions make the text easier to read, but they do not alter its sense. With this break removed the story reads exactly as it did before. It is beyond question that Gildas assigns all credit for the British resistance to Ambrosius, but he nowhere says that Ambrosius fought at Badon. And if he had said Ambrosius was the victor, how would that get rid of Arthur? Surely it would simply mean that Ambrosius was Arthur.

Still more extreme is Richard Barber’s suggestion<sup>95</sup> that the reason Gildas does not give us the name of the commander at Badon is simply that he did not know it. And if Gildas, writing only decades after the event, didn’t know who led the British to that significant victory, we can dismiss the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*’s statement as simple invention. The name of the Badon commander was lost before the mid-sixth century. The period of the British resistance was already an obscure and half-forgotten era by Gildas’ day, and his generation can have passed on no valid historical tradition to those who came after. The materials for writing a history of this period were not merely unavailable when the *Historia* was written, they had never existed.

There is a peculiar assumption underlying this theory, but it is not peculiar to Barber. The idea that what Gildas didn’t know cannot have been known to any of his contemporaries is also the basis of E A Thompson’s vision of post-Roman Britain, to which Barber draws our attention. Thompson argues that since Gildas’ version of British history in the Roman period is complete nonsense, then it follows that, in the Britain of his day, “Knowledge of the outside world and knowledge of the past had been wiped out of men’s minds.”<sup>96</sup>

History has to be written from the written record, but that is no excuse for dispensing with logic. We have only one surviving text, but its solitary survival shouldn’t give that

<sup>93</sup> J N L Myres, *The English Settlements*, p15

<sup>94</sup> O J Padel, *The Nature of Arthur* in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (Summer) 1994, pp 1-31 - see Thomas Green, *The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur*, p7-8

<sup>95</sup> in *King Arthur: Hero and Legend*, Woodbridge : Boydell, 1986

<sup>96</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p115

one text the authority of sacred scripture. Gildas' errors and omissions are not even proof of his own ignorance, let alone of an entire generation's. That he failed to name the victor of Badon is no kind of evidence that he couldn't, let alone that no one else could. At the time Gildas wrote, barely forty three years, according to his own statement, after that battle, the probability is that there were men still alive who had fought there. And is it likely none of those who took part in the battle boasted to their children and grandchildren about their heroic past, or sang the praises of their glorious leader? Does Richard Barber imagine these Dark Age Britons were a different species from ourselves?

The attempt to exclude Arthur from history is sometimes taken to ludicrous extremes. But why? The fact of the British resistance can't be eliminated. Why should historians feel the need to go to such lengths just to remove the name?

## Chapter 3

### National Myths

*These weren't called the Dark Ages for nothing. Few people could write so almost no fifth-century documents exist. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur must have been a Briton, and as a Dark Age king would have been far less refined and probably far less good looking than the medieval king I played in Camelot.*

*Richard Harris, 2002<sup>97</sup>*

#### The Arthur Deception

The problem with Arthur is the legend. Historians wish to discard the name, not because of the paucity of historical evidence, but because of the power of the legend. They are obliged to admit that there may have been an Arthur, someone bearing or known by that name or something like it, who fought against the Saxons, but the point is that he can have been nothing like the Arthur of popular imagination. That Arthur derives from a medieval story, embroidered by poets and painters over many centuries. What they have handed down to us is an image of Arthur as a Golden Age king - and you cannot have a Golden Age king living in a Dark Age.

The British Dark Age is the primary evidence against the most famous British king. Some historians do envisage an Arthur who might have existed in that period, but he is the precise antithesis of the noble, chivalrous ruler, champion of justice and defender of the weak that the stories commemorate. As Francis Prior explained in the BBC's *Arthur, King of the Britons*, the leader of the British resistance "wouldn't have had shining armour, because there wasn't any shining armour in the fifth century AD." Thus he can have been neither glorious nor good: "He'd probably look pretty grubby ... He was probably, I suspect, a pretty unpleasant bit of work, like most warlords are."<sup>98</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright sees him as a "tough little Celt".<sup>99</sup> The Arthur acceptable to academics would have to be a man of his era: nasty, brutish and short.

It is because the public persists in imagining an Arthur who could never have been that Dark Age historians have resorted to excluding his name from history. The name itself has the power to conjure up a Past As Wished For and these professional historians feel themselves professionally obliged to demolish such false constructs. Thus they still treat the Arthurian legend as if it were a deception, and Geoffrey of Monmouth as if he had perpetrated a hoax. This approach does nothing to elucidate the problem of Arthur.

Collingwood's warning about selective use of the evidence was not addressed to the general public, still less to twelfth-century storytellers, it was addressed to

<sup>97</sup> presenting *Arthur, King of the Britons*, broadcast on BBC One, 31st March 2002

<sup>98</sup> interviewed for *Arthur, King of the Britons*, broadcast on BBC One, 31st March 2002

<sup>99</sup> reported in *The Times*, Friday August 7th 1998

professional historians. It is particularly inapplicable to the case, in that where Arthur is concerned Dark Age historians habitually see only the speck in their brother's eye, and not the log in their own. And we do have a far more useful and relevant tool for unpicking this Arthurian knot: R H C Davis' concept of National Myths.

### **The British Hero**

As Davis says, no nation can be without an image or myth with which it can identify itself. In *The Normans and their Myth* he argues that it was their national myth that held the Normans together as a people. They came of various races, but what made them a nation was their own belief in their nationhood, and in their national destiny. That belief was encapsulated in the story of Rollo the Viking, a pagan led by God to found the Norman nation, his conquests legitimised by conversion to Christianity and the granting of his dukedom by the king of France. The British equivalent of Rollo is Arthur.

Arthur was the central point and pivot of his people's national myth. The once and future king was bound up with their entire sense of themselves as a people. The British of Geoffrey's day were, in their own description, the original inhabitants of the land of Britain, and still its rightful rulers. Though the best of their lands had been taken by the treacherous Saxon they were not lost for good. Arthur, who in the time of Badon had led them to victory against the invader, would surely return to lead them once more.

The time when the British had held the island of Britain, between the Roman 'Withdrawal' and the Saxon Conquest, was not a Dark Age in their memory. It was their lost Golden Age. Arthur was, for them, a Golden Age ruler. They were not lying. Given what they had lost in the Saxon conquest, theirs was a perfectly valid perspective.

It is his people's interpretation of the British past that Geoffrey of Monmouth, a British patriot, bequeathed to the Middle Ages and so, eventually, to us. How the British national myth, originally directed against the English, came to be cherished as a part of the English national identity is a question that can be understood historically, odd though it may appear at first glance.

It didn't begin with Geoffrey. It began with the Norman conquest of England. There was a large Breton contingent in William's army, rewarded like the rest with land grants in the newly acquired territory. But it wasn't new to them. It was their rightful inheritance, its return the fulfilment of prophecy. In the light of the British national myth the Norman conquest of England could be presented, not as a violent usurpation, but as a restitution. This is a view the Normans were happy to adopt.

Geoffrey's history was written two generations after the conquest. Though he was not the first to introduce Arthur to a non-Celtic audience, he is credited with turning the Matter of Britain into the primary story cycle of medieval Europe, eclipsing in popularity the Matter of France, the stories of Charlemagne and his companions, and the Matter of Rome, tales of the ancient world, Alexander, the siege of Troy, etc. Patriotism was certainly one of Geoffrey's motives. But the book was written under the patronage of one of the most powerful Norman lords of his day, Robert of Gloucester, bastard son of King Henry I and grandson of the conqueror. Scholars are not agreed on exactly

what use Geoffrey expected Robert to make of his history, but that a political use was intended is beyond doubt.

The legend of Arthur was very deliberately exploited by later kings of England to enhance their own prestige and to expand their dominion. As the French had Charlemagne the first Holy Roman Emperor, the Plantagenets, so frequently at war with them, had Emperor Arthur, a mighty predecessor to add glamour to their crown and through his historical precedent legitimise their conquests. Thus Edward I cited Geoffrey's history before the papal court in 1301 in support of his claim to dominion over the kingdom of Scotland, on the grounds that Arthur had ruled that land also. Which doesn't mean Edward was duped by Geoffrey. People do not need to be fooled into promoting that which is in their own interest.

It was royal patronage that integrated Arthur, hammer of the Saxons, into the English national myth. As the Norman kings married into the Wessex royal line, as the Plantagenets adopted the forename Edward, the alien conquerors slowly transformed themselves into the rightful rulers of England. Arthur, the adopted glorious ancestor of England's kings, was quite naturally adopted by the English themselves. So much so that when Polydore Vergil in his history of England denounced Geoffrey and even questioned Arthur's existence, his criticism was regarded by many as an outrageous foreign attack on England's national honour.

Renaissance scholarship did not expose Geoffrey, nor dispose of Arthur. Both continued a source of inspiration in art and in politics throughout the sixteenth century. Edmund Spenser's Arthurian epic, *The Faerie Queen*, was written in honour of Elizabeth I. Two of Shakespeare's plays, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline* derive their stories from Geoffrey's book. And the renowned Renaissance scholar John Dee, advocating a North Atlantic empire based on English sea power, still argued his case from the British national myth: Elizabeth I was entitled to this dominion for it had been held before by Arthur, ruler of Britain. **It is to Dee, a Welshman, that we owe the term British Empire**, and Dee derived the concept from Geoffrey's book. Thus the current use of the term British, as a collective name for all the inhabitants of the island of Britain, is a consequence of the Arthurian legend.

Arthur has not lost his appeal to the British people. It is only professional historians who feel a profound antipathy to this once potent figure. What upsets them is the perceived discrepancy between the Arthur of legend and any British leader who might actually have existed in the period. There could be no Golden Age king in this Dark Age. But how do they know it was a dark age?

### **An Age of Darkness**

The idea of Dark Age Britain is not the result of academic study of the available evidence. The name preceded any study of the evidence, and indeed originally precluded any study of the evidence.

Under this term Dark Ages the entire period from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance, that is, the rebirth of Rome in fourteenth-century Italy, was once contemptuously dismissed from consideration. One seventeenth-century historian,

Gilbert Burnet, whose *History of the Reformation* encompassed the medieval period, actually boasted of his ignorance of the source documents: "If any one has more Patience than I, can think it worth while to search into that Rubbish..."<sup>100</sup> For his efforts he received a vote of thanks in both the House of Lords and the Commons and his history remained influential for centuries.

The Dark Ages no longer include the medieval period. As John Morris pointed out, better terms have been found for most of those one thousand years of history. It was his contention that retaining the term for the time of British independence in the fifth and sixth centuries still militates against a proper assessment of that era. It wasn't dark for lack of evidence. The evidence simply hadn't been studied. And this charge David Dumville, in his seminal attack on Morris, effectively admits: "Critical assessment of the earliest of these sources... is still in its infancy" "The textual history of Gildas' *De Excidio* is not yet securely established" "The genealogical collections have so far received almost no critical study" "...must await the time when historiographical and literary-historical research may have reached the point ..." "A lot of work must still be done on these problems, but there is a strong chance that we shall have to reconstruct the Gildasian text..." "There is a vast amount of work to be done here, but we rush it at our peril."<sup>101</sup>

Morris argued for a whole new terminology. The pejorative Dark Ages, and its variant the sub-Roman period, should be replaced by a more normal nomenclature, which would give us the Age of Arthur. His fellow historians vehemently rejected the suggestion along with his history. It was based on a study of Celtic texts which no serious historian can now accept as useful historical sources. They prefer to stick with the terms already in use - terms which derive from no academic study whatsoever.

As John Morris remarks, "The term 'Dark Ages' is not the innocent invention of conscientious academics, stumped for the want of a clearer term."<sup>102</sup> The term has always had political implications, and it is in politics that its origins lie.

### **The Heirs of Rome**

The assumptions underlying the term Dark Ages have been so often repeated they are made to seem like facts. Rome fell to the barbarians in the fifth century, and this was a tragedy for mankind. But if the fall of Rome was such a plain and catastrophic fact, how come it was passed over for a thousand years, unlamented, even unnoticed?

It was in 1453 that the historian Biondo proposed to treat Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 as marking the end of an historical epoch. In this he broke decisively with the historiography of medieval Europe. Rome had until then been considered the last of the four great world empires, destined to endure until the end of the world. The notion originates in the fifth century, with Augustine's pupil Orosius, and with the Roman Christian notion that the Empire was God's instrument for spreading the Christian message. As Christ's message must reach all mankind before the Last Days, Rome could not fall until that time; hence the saying *Quando cadet Roma, cadet et Mundus* -

<sup>100</sup> Edwin Jones, *The English Nation*, p71

<sup>101</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, pp 173, 178,183, 184 & 190

<sup>102</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p507

'when Rome falls, the universe will fall with it'.<sup>103</sup>

For medieval Europe, the Fall of Rome was an event in the future. What we see as the end of the western empire was to them merely a transformation, and a transference. The principal powers of medieval Europe, the Roman Church and the Holy Roman Empire, both claimed to derive their authority from the ancient Empire. It was admitted there had been a gap in the succession of western Emperors, but the theory was that the imperial power in the west had then been invested in the Church, until in 800 AD Pope Leo III elevated the Frankish King Charlemagne to the Imperial throne, an event known as the *translatio ad francos* (or, more fully, *translatio imperii ad francos et teutonicos*). Pope and Emperor were thereafter left to dispute which of them had the prime authority.

Enlightened writers mocked their pretensions: The German dominion was, infamously, neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. So far from inheriting the Roman *imperium* it was the invading hordes of German barbarians who had destroyed the superior culture of the ancient world, replacing it with their own, inferior Gothic models. As for the Roman Church, her claims were based on the Donation of Constantine, a forgery which the intellects of pre-Renaissance Europe proved incapable of penetrating: "Such was the state of scholarship at that time, no one saw through it, though a schoolboy could do so today. It was not until a papal aid, Lorenzo Valla, took it apart line by line in 1440 that it was proved to be a fraud".<sup>104</sup> The Church also had no part in an imperial inheritance but was, as much as the German hordes, the cause of its demise. The high intellectual culture of the Classical world was reduced to ruin not only by the horrors of barbarian invasion, but by the blind fanaticism of her superstitious, idle, ignorant monks.

This view has been modified down the years, but not substantially changed. Constant repetition has made this story of the Fall of Rome and its aftermath seem like a fact. But it is not a fact. The facts can be marshalled to tell a very different story.

The Roman Empire did not fall to the German barbarians in 410 AD. Alaric sacked the city of Rome in that year. The empire's principal city at that time was Constantinople. Old Rome wasn't even the capital of the western empire. The western Emperor Honorius survived the attack in his untouched capital, Ravenna. The elevation of western Emperors continued until 476, when the German Odovacer deposed Romulus Augustulus and ruled Italy as king. He did so with the connivance of the Senate and the consent of the eastern Emperor Zeno, who conferred on him the title of Patrician and himself continued to rule as sole Emperor over the Roman Empire. Zeno was not relinquishing the western half of the empire, he was just granting another capable barbarian an official position of authority within it.

The German hordes did not break into the Empire in an unstoppable wave in the fifth century AD. Alaric was stopped, by Stilicho - who was a Vandal. The first German settlement was actually in the third century, part of the general upheaval marking the end of the 'Golden Age of the Antonines'. Gibbon describes the 'horrid picture' in the reign of Gallienus, 260-268: nineteen usurpers raised against the legitimate, if

<sup>103</sup> F W Walbank, *The Awful Revolution*, p12

<sup>104</sup> Peter de Rosa, *Vicars of Christ*, p57



contemptible, authority of the Emperor; a successful Persian invasion of the eastern Empire; central authority disintegrated, large sections of the Empire ruled locally, including the kingdom of Palmyra whose separation was made official; Egypt devastated by the mindless violence of the Alexandrian masses, heirs to the combined vices of their mixed Greek and Egyptian parentage; Roman rule permanently overthrown in Isauria, a mountain region in Asia Minor, her people "returned to the savage manners from which they had never perfectly been reclaimed";<sup>105</sup> the Empire invaded by numerous Germanic peoples, amongst them the Heruli, whose chief, outmatched, "accepted an honourable capitulation, entered with a large body of his countrymen into the service of Rome and was invested with the ornaments of the consular dignity."<sup>106</sup> This was a sign of things to come.

By the time of Alaric many Germans were already incorporated into the Empire, as much forced over the frontier by the pressure of other peoples migrating out of central Asia as they were drawn in by the wealth of Rome. They were not entirely unwelcome: the Roman Empire was suffering from depopulation, in part caused by the extreme economic oppression of its lower classes, and German immigrants helped make good the shortage of soldiers and agricultural labour. They were also, as we have seen, very useful against rebellious peasants. Alaric's followers were eventually employed by Rome in this capacity. But this was a return to form - they were Roman allies before the sack of Rome.

The Visigoths, the Western Goths, were already settled within the empire before Alaric's elevation to the kingship, having entered originally as refugees fleeing from the Huns, with the permission of Emperor Valens and on condition they surrender their weapons. It was the greed and corruption of the Roman officials that turned the Goths from allies to enemies. They kept their weapons, on payment of a bribe, but were fed only at outrageous prices. The starving Goths turned to plunder. The officials tried to assassinate their leaders. War broke out. At Adrianople in 378 the Goths smashed the Roman army and overran the Balkans. They eventually entered into a treaty with Emperor Theodosius, after he had failed to subdue them.

Alaric's attack on Rome was not an invasion from without but a revolt from within. The Gothic king was a disruptive opportunist, but not an overwhelming threat. He was checked repeatedly by Stilicho, commander in chief of the western armies. Unfortunately for Rome, Honorius' government seems to have considered Stilicho a worse threat than Alaric; a palace conspiracy destroyed him. Alaric was left free to ravage Italy - had he wished to. But what the Gothic king was really after was not the destruction of the Empire but a position within it commensurate with his regal dignity and military supremacy: the post of Master of Soldiers, still vacant after the death of its last German occupant, seemed a reasonable prospect. It was two whole years after the execution of Stilicho, when Honorius' government had repulsed all his attempts to reach a settlement, that Alaric finally sacked Rome.

Eight years later Alaric's Goths, now under Wallia, returned to their Roman alliance and were settled in Aquitania. And this was the norm. Every other German tribe who

<sup>105</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter 10 part 4 (Low, p110)

<sup>106</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter 10 part 3 (Low, p110)

migrated into the Empire, save only the Vandals in Africa and, arguably, the Saxons in Britain, was settled in its new home by the Roman state machinery, "under ordinary billeting laws, that had been established long ago to provide temporary maintenance for troops on the move."<sup>107</sup> They were there by permission. They could be removed. In 488 the Emperor Zeno ungranted the title of Patrician to Odovacer and conferred it on the Ostrogoth king, Theodoric (though it was left it to Theodoric to enforce the decision). Theodoric's heirs, in turn, were overthrown by Emperor Justinian, and Italy, along with North Africa, Southern Spain and the Mediterranean islands was subject to direct rule from the east. Visigothic power in Gaul was ended at the decision of the Imperial authorities and replaced by Frankish dominion. Procopius reports that the Merovingian kings of the Franks never felt secure in their position unless the Emperor ratified their title.<sup>108</sup> One can readily believe it.

The Church played a major role in the rise of the Franks and the downfall of the Goths in Gaul. The Goths were Arians, converted to that heretical form of Christianity before their incursion into the Empire. The Franks entered the empire as pagans, and were baptised into the orthodox faith - that is, the faith of the Empire. But the Church was not something separate from the Empire. It was part of the Empire, part of the administrative machinery of the state. It was what remained in the west when the rest of the state machinery disintegrated. The popes really had inherited a quasi-Imperial power, and even an Imperial title, **Pontifex Maximus, originally the appellation of the high priest of pagan Rome, but held by all Roman Emperors from the time of Julius Caesar until the pious Theodosius refused the honour. It was Theodosius' co-emperor, Gratian, the victim of Maximus' usurpation, who resigned the title to Pope Damasus,** decades before Rome fell to Alaric. When the western emperors left the city, the popes remained. Ravenna, secular capital of Italy under German kings and Byzantine exarchs, never acquired the ecclesiastical prestige of old Rome.

The eastern Emperor remained the official ruler of the Christian west until Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne in 800. It was to counter the inevitable charge of rebellion that the papacy concocted the infamous Donation of Constantine. Theoretically the eastern emperor could have elevated a colleague to the long redundant post of western emperor, as his predecessors had done in the fifth century. The Donation appeared to give the pope the same privilege. The document was a forgery, but papal inheritance from the Empire was no lie. The exercise of that power proves its reality; the eastern emperor's rule over Italy was ended, and his authority transferred to the Frank king, by papal decision.

The eastern Roman Empire was finally destroyed by Islam, but the process took centuries. It was in the sixth century that the prophet Mohammed began preaching. By 630 all Arabia had united under his new religion and his followers turned to external conquests. Persia, reduced to political chaos following a decisive defeat at the hands of the Emperor Heraclius, fell to Muslim rule within decades. Eastern Rome, equally exhausted by the recent conflict, proved too weak to defend herself against the new threat. All her southern provinces fell to Islam in the seventh century, first Syria,

<sup>107</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p22

<sup>108</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VII.33.4

Palestine and Egypt, and then North Africa. By 720 most of Spain was in Muslim hands. Further expansion into the western empire was checked in 732, at the battle of Poitiers. The victor was Charles Martel, grandfather of the Emperor Charlemagne. The Roman Empire, now once again divided into two halves, continued to lose ground to Islam, despite the crusades - which originated in a request by the eastern Emperor for assistance from his fellow Christians against the common foe. But it was not until 1435 that Constantinople finally fell to the Turkish Sultan Mahomet II, eleven centuries after Constantine the Great made it the capital of the empire - and only 18 years before Biondo wrote Rome's epitaph.

So which is a Past as Wished For, the *translatio ad francos* or the Fall of Rome? The honest answer must be that they both are, the facts could be made to support either, it just depends on who's doing the wishing. But it was not the Progress of Reason, or the academic study of the facts, that caused the one to replace the other; it was politics.

The origins of the Fall of Rome, as an idea, lie in the medieval dispute between Pope and Emperor over which of them had inherited the power of the Roman Emperors. It was in Italy that the conflict most frequently came to a head. In consequence two political factions developed in Italy, the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. The Guelfs, encouraged by the popes, sought to free their city states from imperial rule and establish republics on the ancient model - a policy roundly condemned by Dante Alighieri, who ironically is often treated as the first Renaissance poet. Dante was a Florentine Ghibelline, exiled from his native city for his convictions. He denounced Guelf politics as divisive and racist, as well as theologically unsound.<sup>109</sup> But the Guelfs won. Their actions implicitly denied the *translatio ad francos*. A Renaissance Italian, the secretary of four successive popes, was later to deny it explicitly. Biondo's notion of the Fall of Rome redefined the historical role of the Germans, and thus of the Holy Roman Emperors: They were not the heirs to the Roman Empire, they were its destroyers, and rebellion against them was thereby legitimised. The Enlightenment view of history originates in an Italian national myth.

### **The Politics of History**

A Past as Wished For is a construction arrived at by a selective and partial use of the historical data. A national myth is a very different thing. It is not meant to be impartial.

The *translatio ad francos* was a pan-European national myth. It legitimised the power structures of western Europe in the medieval period. A claim of political descent from the Roman Empire was a claim to legitimate power. The Italian national myth of the Fall of Rome delegitimised the Holy Roman Emperors by denying this political descent. The true heirs of Rome were the Italian republicans themselves, the racial descendants of the ancient Romans. Adopted by Enlightenment historians this Italian national myth became the next pan-European myth. It served to delegitimise the Roman Church, the political authorities she supported and indeed the entire edifice of medieval Christian thought. A thousand years of our history could be written off as the

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<sup>109</sup> see Richard Kay, *Dante's Swift and Strong*, esp. p191-206

Sleep of Reason. Only with the Renaissance, and the rediscovery of the ancient world, could progress begin again. The Roman inheritance had skipped a millennium. Rome's true heirs, her intellectual descendants, were their Enlightened selves.

None of this has anything to do with academic analysis of the historical data. No one discovered the British Dark Ages by analysing the data. No one discovered the fall of Rome by analysing the data. And no one discovered that ancient Rome was a pinnacle of human achievement which later societies might aspire through anything resembling an academic study of the facts.

The Roman Empire, at its height, was not what most of us would regard as an ideal society. Granted the Romans left a vast quantity of remains to entertain the archaeologist, and plenty of documents for the historian to engage with, yet all this evidence of a 'higher' culture does not add up to a good life for the majority. Liberty, equality and fraternity had no place in the Roman system. Power and wealth were concentrated in the hands of the few. Those admired marble palaces, with their mosaics, murals and under-floor heating, were enjoyed by a tiny elite. For most, incorporation into the Roman Empire meant a rapid descent into dire poverty. Of course there was the compensation of bread and circuses, for the Roman masses at least. The bread was extracted from the overtaxed peasants of Egypt and Africa, the circuses were bloody spectacles in which people and animals were publicly tortured as a form of entertainment. The human victims of these games might be criminals, prisoners of war, or simply slaves bought for the purpose. And slaves were not a small minority in the Roman system. They constituted around one third of the population, who did not even own themselves, who could be sold apart from their families, who could give evidence only under torture (and it was used),<sup>110</sup> who did not have the right to refuse the sexual demands of their masters. The full horror of this is evidenced in the writings of early Christian apologists: "I pity the boys possessed by the slave-dealers, that are decked for dishonour. But they are not treated with ignominy by themselves, but by command the wretches are adorned for base gain." "And as the ancients are said to have reared herds of oxen, or goats, or sheep, or grazing horses, so now we see you rear children only for this shameful use... And you receive the hire of these, and duty and taxes from them".<sup>111</sup> The Roman poet Horace puts the matter more lightly, from the master's perspective: "When your pecker's stiff, why torture it? A servant girl is there to serve, and house boys will serve as well. I'm not fastidious. I love an easy Venus, one who comes at call."<sup>112</sup>

Veneration of Rome was never a consequence of academic study. It is a genuine medieval inheritance. Rome has been the font and symbol of legitimate authority throughout most of European history. The Middle Ages looked to Christian Rome, to the Empire of Constantine, as the source of God-given authority. The Italian city states of the Renaissance took republican Rome as their model. For the Enlightenment, it was the pagan Empire under philosopher emperors like Marcus Aurelius. Edward

<sup>110</sup> see M I Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, p95

<sup>111</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 3.3; Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 27 trans. Philip Schaff in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, on [www.ccel.org/](http://www.ccel.org/)

<sup>112</sup> Horace, *Satire 1.2*, trans. John Svarlien on [www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/horsat1.2.shtml](http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/horsat1.2.shtml)

Gibbon terms it the golden age of the Antonines: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom."<sup>113</sup>

When the Arthurian golden age was discarded it wasn't because men had ceased to believe in golden ages. The golden age had shifted in time and space. It was three centuries earlier, and its epicentre a long way south of their own homeland. Independent Britain was now at the nadir of the cycle. This looks strangely like a useful national myth being discarded in favour of one highly derogatory of the nation, but in truth it is no such thing. Once again the process has to be understood historically.

It was not in the Renaissance that the Italian national myth displaced the British. England and Wales - or Britain as Dee's new terminology would have it - were then ruled by the Tudors, a dynasty with roots in Wales and a tenuous claim to descent from Arthur. But it was political changes originating in the Tudor period which made a change in national myth inevitable.

In 1533 Henry VIII discarded his first wife, a Spanish princess who had failed to provide a male heir, and married Ann Boleyn. As the pope of the time was in the power of Queen Catherine's relatives he could not get an annulment, so the new marriage entailed a breach with the papacy. But the British national myth and the Ghibelline tradition were well able to accommodate this change. Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of the English Church*, more popularly known as Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which was by government orders placed on display in every cathedral church in the country, presents Elizabeth I, Henry and Anne's daughter, as the New Constantine. The first English edition of the book contains the dedication "Constantine the greate and mightie Emperour, the **sonne of Helene an Englyshe woman** of this your realme and country..." with an illuminated capital C portraying Elizabeth as Justice trampling the pope underfoot.<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth, the royal virgin, was the true heir to the Roman Emperors in this corner of the empire, and the head of its Church. The British national myth allowed the Protestant Reformation to be presented, not as a rebellion against a previous authority, but as a return to the original purity of faith after centuries of Papal usurpation and interference.<sup>115</sup>

But the massive growth of state power under the Tudors sowed the seeds of the next revolution, and that one proved fatal to the old national myth. Arthur survived the change of dynasty. James I apparently showed no interest but his eldest son Prince Henry commissioned artists to work on Arthurian themes. But Arthur was, inescapably, a symbol of royal authority, inextricably bound up with the Divine Right of Kings. When Charles I was executed in 1649, Arthur fell with him.

The Parliamentarians were squarely on the side of the Saxons. Study of Saxon law had bolstered them in their struggle against the Crown, for they saw themselves as

<sup>113</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter 3 part 2 (Low, p1)

<sup>114</sup> Francis A Yates, *Astraea*, p42-3

<sup>115</sup> Edwin Jones, *The English Nation*, p49-53

“rebels against a ‘Norman yoke’, revitalised by Tudor authority, and strove consciously to revive what they held to be their native tradition”.<sup>116</sup> Milton exemplifies the transition: in his youth he had intended to write an Arthurian epic himself, but in his maturity dismissed the entire Arthurian matter as 'trash'.

But when revolutionaries become the new authority, they naturally turn into authoritarians. The Protectorate was followed by the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution, as the wealthier Parliamentarians found it more profitable to share power with kings than with Levellers and the like. And as authority shifts, the historical exemplars justifying that authority must shift with it. The Anglo-Saxons and their ancestral freedoms ceased to provide a useful precedent, particularly to the men who had absorbed not only monastery lands but common lands too. The Middle Ages, its myths - and its charters - likewise had no appeal. The post-Revolutionary ruling class, the beneficiaries of change, looked further back for a symbol of enduring authority. They looked to Rome.

It is highly unusual for any nation to incorporate a derogatory view of itself in its national history, but that is not what was actually happening here. The English ruling class were classically educated, heirs to the culture of Rome in their own view. Commoners might look to Saxon freedoms as a cherished inheritance. Rome, in contrast, was the ideal of those who held power.

This class division is already emerging in the time of Elizabeth I, as evidenced in Gabriel Harvey's letter to his friend Edmund Spencer suggesting he abandon his Arthurian epic, *The Faerie Queen*. The theme being rustic, not classical, it is no fit subject for a man of Spencer's talents: "If so be the Fairy Queen be fairer in your eye than the Nine Muses, and Hobgoblin run away with the garland from Apollo... but there is an end for this once, and fare you well, till God or some good Angel put you in a better mind".<sup>117</sup>

The native tradition, with its art, its models and its myths, did not entirely disappear but became the preserve of the defeated and the degraded, of uncultured classes and despised races. William Blake, product of an English artisan class which, at the end of the eighteenth century, was fighting a losing battle against the forces of industrial progress, identified Arthur with his giant Albion, the personification of Britain, and from the most mystical of Arthurian legends created what is surely our alternative National Anthem: "And did those feet in ancient time, walk upon England's mountains green?" This poem, in the preface of Blake's *Milton*, is preceded by a call to arms addressed to his fellow artists, to shake off the pernicious influence of 'the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword': "We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever in Jesus our Lord." Rome, for Blake, represented a satanic, anti-Christian authority, perpetuating itself through the centuries to his own time:

Titus! Constantine! Charlemaine!  
O Voltaire! Rousseau! Gibbon! Vain

<sup>116</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* p509

<sup>117</sup> The letter is dated 7th April, 1580.

Your Grecian Mocks and Roman Sword  
Against this image of his Lord!<sup>118</sup>

Historical perspectives are not the accidental consequence of academic study. Geoffrey's history was adopted by England's rulers for its usefulness. It is because it provided an historical precedent for the English Crown to claim dominion over neighbouring Celtic countries that David Starkey condemns it as a very bad book.<sup>119</sup> But that is to confuse cause and effect.

When the British national myth was discarded, that didn't bring English Imperialism to an end. It just meant there was a need for a new historical precedent, and for the classically educated there was one readily to hand. The Roman Empire became, from the time of the Enlightenment, an historical justification for the British Empire, and continued to be seen in that light well into this century. Just as Rome had once brought the blessings of civilization to benighted barbarian regions, so the British Empire spread the blessings of civilization to the regions she conquered, and the first benighted savages to benefit from her expansion were, of course, her Celtic neighbours.

The English crown's attempted conquest and colonisation of the Celtic nations on her borders had gone on throughout the Middle Ages, but in the seventeenth century it entered a particularly vicious phase. At the time that Geoffrey of Monmouth's history was discarded by educated Englishmen and its view of our pre-Roman ancestors replaced with an image of savages dressed in skins, a Celtic culture in Ireland genuinely rooted in the pre-Roman past finally collapsed under the genocidal assault of English Imperialism. This can hardly be a coincidence.

### **Enlightenment and Empire**

England's Enlightened ruling classes were committed to a veneration of the Roman Empire on the simple premise that one good empire justifies another. Just as the Roman Empire spread the benefits of a higher civilization to the regions it conquered, so the British Empire expanded by force of arms to the benefit of all mankind.

The attitude is brilliantly satirised in Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 And All That - A Memorable History of England*, comprising all the parts you can remember, including 103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings, and 2 Genuine Dates, and dedicated to "the Great British People without whose self-sacrificing determination to become Top Nation there would have been no (memorable) history". The book opens with the second memorable date in British history, Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain, which was a Good Thing, "since the Britons were only natives at that time." This was written in the 1930s, but we still get the joke, because the mentality is still familiar.

Orthodox academic tradition is a direct descendant of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's view of our pre-Roman ancestors is just as much a legend as Geoffrey of Monmouth's story of Brutus the Trojan, great-grandson of Aeneas, who led the first human inhabitants into the land of Britain. Of course no historian now would

<sup>118</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem: To the Deists*.

<sup>119</sup> see above, Chapter 1.2, *The Pseudo-history of Britain*

defend the Enlightenment myth in its entirety: though the image of the British cavemen in fur bikinis still occasionally surfaces, it is no longer found in academic works. But the fact is, conventional academic history has evolved out of Enlightenment myth, and as the following examples illustrate, it hasn't evolved very far.

Graham Webster and Donald R Dudley's *The Rebellion of Boudicca* was published in 1962. Rebellion is not really an accurate label. Boudicca was the queen of the Iceni, ruler of a client kingdom on the borders of the Empire which, on the death of her husband in 60 AD, Rome unilaterally decided to absorb. When the widowed queen objected she was flogged, her daughters gang-raped, and her court plundered. This ritual degradation of deposed royalty is not a unique event in the annals of Rome. The gospels tell us Jesus Christ was subjected to a mock coronation before the torture of crucifixion. This is not an analogy brought out by our authors, who, though regarding the degradation of Boudicca as a regrettable incident and describing the Roman perpetrators as ruffians, still express the view that the queen herself must have done something to provoke it! The atrocities supposedly committed by Boudicca's followers<sup>120</sup> they do not regard as something the Romans brought on themselves, but equate instead to the 'bestiality' of the Mau Mau rebels against British rule, suggesting they were intended to compromise all participants, leaving no course open but a fight to the finish - which ignores the fact that Rome had put the Iceni in that position already.

But the truly mythic passage is their attempt to deduce the date of Boudicca's marriage from the ages of the princesses: "In 59 these girls were too young to play any political part in the rebellion, but old enough to be raped. To ask how old that is may be thought to treat history as an art rather than a science. But one is perhaps entitled to hope that the younger girl was at least twelve, even fourteen: her sister must have been at least a year older."<sup>121</sup> Considering what we know of Roman sexuality, we are surely not 'entitled to hope' any such thing, but that is by the by. The point is that here we have two academics in the latter half of the twentieth century seeking to put the best gloss on a Roman political atrocity nineteen centuries old. Why?

The same authors have a comment or two to make on the druids, those wicked fomenters of discontent and sedition against the righteous rule of the Romans. Archaeologists, they tell us, have discovered slave chains on the island of Anglesey, the druids' headquarters according to Roman authorities. Thus hard evidence disposes of our romantic illusions on this ancient Celtic priesthood: "The characteristic achievement of our age is to find the slave chains of the druids, in place of speculating on their views about the immortality of the soul."<sup>122</sup>

And on the subject of slavery, this is from R H Barrow's *The Romans*, first published in 1949 but still in print as late as 1976: "Of course, cases of cruelty were common enough; but legislation restricted it as public opinion made itself felt, and masters like

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<sup>120</sup> The story is that noble Roman women were impaled on stakes with their breasts sewn to their mouths, but the source of this tale gives strong grounds for treating it as a complete fabrication: see below, Chapter 4.2, *The Druids and Stonehenge*

<sup>121</sup> Donald R Dudley & Graham Webster, *The Rebellion of Boudicca*, p48

<sup>122</sup> Donald R Dudley & Graham Webster, *The Rebellion of Boudicca*, p130.



Pliny were kind enough, not to say indulgent. Many a slave was the trusted friend of his master. Indeed, slavery comes nearest to its justification in the early Roman Empire; for a man from a 'backward' race might be brought within the pale of civilization, educated and trained in a craft or profession, and turned into a useful member of society."<sup>123</sup> Backward races - that would include the Celts, of course.

It is this mentality that underlies the terminology still in use, 'the Dark Ages', 'the sub-Roman period'. Sub-Roman stands in the same relation to Roman as subhuman stands to human. As R G Collingwood explains in *Roman Britain*, published 1936: "this... was a period of moral degeneration. The higher civilization of the lowland zone was undermined by truckling to the lower civilization of its new masters. Men like Vortigern imposed their standards on Britain. From 455, when the new Easter was accepted by the British church, we hear of no more cultural and spiritual contacts between Britain and the Mediterranean world ... Roman Britain is now rapidly dying, and we are reaching the 'sub-Roman' period, when men lived on the relics of Romanity diluted in a pervading medium of Celticism."<sup>124</sup> Charles Thomas in 1986, takes the same view: "Britain's history between 400 and 800 can - loosely, but justifiably - be labelled sub-Roman... the general course of affairs in the 5th century demonstrates that the structure of Britannia, left to itself, was inadequate to uphold the imprint of Rome - to survive in isolation, maintaining the fruits of progress and discipline."<sup>125</sup>

The most extreme case must be E A Thompson, who in 1984 concluded that the ultimate result of Rome's departure was that sixth-century Britain collapsed into a total intellectual vacuum: "The most frightening feature in the picture drawn by Gildas is not the destruction of city-life in Britain or the break-up of the Imperial system with its guarantee of peaceful life, but rather the destruction of knowledge itself. Knowledge of the outside world and knowledge of the past had been wiped out of men's minds."<sup>126</sup>

So that's how the Dark Ages came into being. Roman rule ended; the native culture of Britain revived. The process is usually called decolonisation. Is it necessarily a Bad Thing? Any scholar of conventional outlook, raised in the time of the British Empire would have known that it must have been a catastrophe for the native British. In those days that was the prevailing view. Even George Orwell, hardly the most obvious apologist for Empire, predicted in the 1940s<sup>127</sup> that if Britain pulled out of India the country would inevitably be recolonised by a new invader, there would be a complete economic collapse, and thousands would die in the resulting famines. As it turned out, that's not what happened in India. How do we know it is what happened in post-Roman Britain? We have the evidence of Gildas - one man!

Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain* is not a history, historians assure us, it's a sermon: Its historical section was intended purely to back the sermon's theme, a denunciation of the British lay and ecclesiastical authorities of the day. It is marked by Gildas' "hatred

<sup>123</sup> R H Barrow, *The Romans*, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, 1976, p99

<sup>124</sup> R G Collingwood and J N L Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p315

<sup>125</sup> Charles Thomas, *Celtic Britain*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986, p37-8

<sup>126</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p115

<sup>127</sup> In an essay entitled *The Lion and the Unicorn*

for everything that is native to Britain and his admiration of the golden Roman past"<sup>128</sup>, which is to say he might not be impartial. So how far can we trust Gildas? Historians trust him implicitly. His history is obviously complete nonsense for most of its length, but it is assumed to be honest nonsense. Gildas told the truth in so far as he knew it. For his own period he is an eye-witness, and his testimony must be credited as fact. But as for earlier periods, his catalogue of historical errors must be put down to ignorance, an ignorance he must have shared with all his contemporaries. And so we have the melodramatic picture of Dark Age Britain's total cultural collapse, knowledge itself being 'wiped out of men's minds.'

"[M]any historians share the outlook of established authority"<sup>129</sup>, John Morris reminds us at the conclusion of *The Age of Arthur*. Of course they're entitled to, but this does introduce the possibility of a biased consensus. This is particularly relevant when so much depends on a single text. History has to be written from the written record, and all we have is Gildas, whose pro-Roman, anti-British bias matches that of the historians who study him. Is Gildas really evidence for Britain's collapse into a Dark Age? Or does their belief that this was a dark age predispose historians to credit, on the evidence of one text, the post Roman collapse of Britain's economy to subsistence level and the complete disintegration of her intellectual life? And there is a still more fundamental question, one which Dark Age historians don't seem to have thought to ask: Why is Gildas the only text we have contemporary with Arthur's period?

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<sup>128</sup> Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p45

<sup>129</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, 509

## Chapter 4

### Forbidden Histories

*During the first part of the eighteenth century the possession of an Irish book made the owner a suspect person, and was often the cause of his ruin. In some parts of the country the tradition of the danger incurred by having Irish manuscripts lived down to within my own memory; and I have seen Irish manuscripts which had been buried until the writing had almost faded, and the margins rotted away, to avoid the danger their discovery would entail at the visit of the local yeomanry.*

*Eugene O'Curry, 1873<sup>130</sup>*

#### **The Nature of the Record**

There are two sides to every story. But in history quite commonly only one gets told. For history has to be written from the record, but both the record, and the historical tradition within which it is interpreted, are an inheritance from the past - from the victors. Historians are perfectly aware of this bias, but generally they are not inclined to stretch themselves to correct it since it is a bias which agrees with their own. Most historians share the outlook of established authority, as John Morris remarks. They tend to favour the concept of progress and to take a deterministic view of their subject, as if the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest applied also to nations and cultures. The best man must have won; against the verdict of history there is no appeal.

There is an almost religious commitment to this veneration of the victor among historians. And indeed it was originally a religious belief. Though Rationalist terminology has come to replace the biblical, Progress is the child of Providence, and Providence a direct descendant of the God of Victories, the God who sanctioned Cromwell's slaughter of the Irish as He sanctioned Joshua's slaughter of the Canaanites. Certain unorthodox groups, defeated religious traditions, had another name for this deity: Ialdabaoth, Rex Mundi, the demonic lord of this world. William Blake called him Old Nobodaddy.

Not everyone takes the side of the conquistadors. There is an alternative, Romantic view which does not accept that everything happens for the best in this the best of all possible worlds, which holds that the March of Progress has trampled something valuable into the dust, that defeated peoples and traditions may have been guardians of a superior wisdom which could still be revived, and which may prove vital for our futures. This view has many adherents. Every year a wealth of books on 'alternative' history are published and they do not suffer from a shortage of readers. But all this is outside official academia. Respectable historians have no trouble dismissing it with contempt. Real history has to be from the written record, and the written record, preserved by the winning side, quite naturally supports official history, the winners

<sup>130</sup> *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, see Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids*, p197

history. But what happens when it doesn't?

In the middle of the last century two caches of ancient documents were unearthed from the deserts of the Middle East. Both were buried in jars and hidden in order to preserve them from destruction at the hands of history's victors. The Dead Sea scrolls were found in 1947, in caves above the ancient Jewish settlement of Qumran, from where they are assumed to originate. It is thought these Jewish religious texts were hidden during one of the Judaeen revolts against Roman rule. The Nag Hammadi library was discovered in the Egyptian desert in 1945. These largely Gnostic texts are believed to have been hidden by monks from a nearby Coptic monastery, to save them from a purge initiated in 367 AD by bishop Athanasius of Alexandria against heretics and their "apocryphal books to which they attribute antiquity and give the name of saints".<sup>131</sup>

Before the discovery of these texts what historians knew of Gnosticism came largely from the writings of its enemies, Church fathers who from the second century AD had branded it a heresy which had insinuated itself into the Christian body, an alien penetration from without. The academic world had accepted that verdict. Adolf von Harnack, at the end of the nineteenth century, famously defined Gnosticism as "the acute Hellenisation of Christianity", and Hans Jonas, in the mid-twentieth century, termed it an "aggressor" against the Christian religion "whose cause it threatened to subvert".<sup>132</sup> The Gnostics, of course, claimed the opposite - they were the original Church of Christ and the orthodox who persecuted them a later perversion of the true teachings. But before the discovery of Nag Hammadi the written record did not seem to back them. Now, apparently, it did.

The Nag Hammadi library contains a wide variety of documents, fifty two in total, mostly Christian Gnostic but including Jewish Gnostic, Hermetic and Neoplatonic texts, also texts which appear perfectly orthodox, others which defy categorisation, and even a fragment of Plato's Republic. A number of them are titled gospels, among them *The Gospel of Thomas* which introduced itself with these words: "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas<sup>133</sup> wrote down."<sup>134</sup> Biblical scholarship had long postulated a simple collection of sayings underlying the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which they had termed Q. Now here was a gospel composed entirely of sayings, claiming to be written by one of the twelve apostles. But the message of 'Thomas' is quite unlike that of the canonical gospels: it "spares us the crucifixion, makes the resurrection unnecessary and does not present us with a God named Jesus."<sup>135</sup> It does, however, recall one piece of obscured Christian history, presented in a brief dialogue: "The followers said to Jesus, "We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?" Jesus said to them "No matter where you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and

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<sup>131</sup> James M Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, p19

<sup>132</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1963, pp xvi & xiv

<sup>133</sup> the names 'Didymos' and 'Thomas', are nick names, both meaning 'twin'.

<sup>134</sup> trans. Thomas O Lambdin, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M Robinson

<sup>135</sup> Harold Bloom, in Marvin Meyer's translation of *The Gospel of Thomas*, p111

earth came into being.”<sup>136</sup> In the official version of Church history the first head of the Church was Peter, whom Christ appointed to that post. But actually the first head of the Church, the Jewish church centred on Jerusalem, was indeed James, as Biblical scholars well knew, and they knew also that this early Church, though it held Jesus to be the Messiah, did not regard him as the incarnate Son of God.

If history is to be written from the written record, then the discovery of this Gnostic library meant the history of Gnosticism, and the history of the early Church, would have to be rewritten. But documents cannot become a part of the written record whilst they remain the preserve of a handful of scholars, and these documents were not allowed to burst suddenly on an unprepared world. It took three decades and the intervention of UNESCO to resolve the complications, disputes over ownership and scholastic claims to monopoly power which beset the Nag Hammadi collection. By 1977, however, the entire corpus was in the public domain. The written record now backed the Gnostics' claim; theirs was not a perversion of Christian orthodoxy but an entirely different form of Christianity, equally ancient, equally authentic. Yet a decade later it was still possible for a professional historian, discussing Gnosticism in the second century, to remark: “heretical ideas and groups survived, catering for those who wished to be perverse”.<sup>137</sup>

The public release of the Dead Sea scrolls dragged on even longer, becoming an academic scandal as the coterie which controlled them, the International Team, hung on to its monopoly for years, then decades, releasing their translations at an inordinately slow pace. One scholar, off the record, reports that he was told to “go slow” on his translation “so that the crazies will get tired and go away.”<sup>138</sup> Among the crazies was Robert Eisenman, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies and Professor of Middle East Religions at California State University, Long Beach. Eisenman had a theory about the origin of the scrolls which was entirely at odds with the consensus being established by the International Team. They were, in his view, the documents of the Jewish Church, the first Christian community headed by James the Just, and recorded its struggle against the heretic St. Paul. To test his theory he would, of course, need access to the documents. The International Team blocked him at every turn. When their monopoly was finally broken, after forty five years, it was not by their consent. An unknown benefactor sent Eisenman photographs of the entire missing corpus, which he and Michael Wise, a professor of Aramaic, made ready for publication in the space of six weeks.<sup>139</sup> But by that time the ‘consensus view’ held the field - the scrolls were produced by the Essenes, and thus not the major threat to orthodox Christianity they might at first have appeared.

There is nothing new in this. Two centuries earlier the written record had expanded by a different route. A freelance scholar, Thomas Taylor, devoted himself to the translation and publication of neglected Greek texts of the Neoplatonic tradition. His efforts were not universally appreciated. Kathleen Raine remarks that “Taylor was

<sup>136</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, 12, trans. Marvin Meyer, p27

<sup>137</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p332

<sup>138</sup> Michael Baigent & Richard Leigh, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception*, p62

<sup>139</sup> see Robert Eisenman & Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, introduction

ridiculed, even persecuted, for bringing to the attention of his age a philosophy so subversive to the established values; for the Augustan view of “the classics” could not survive the translation of Plato into English.” There was nothing wrong with Taylor’s scholarship, the problem was in the content of his translations. The written record of the victors did not require these new additions. “The *Edinburgh Review* published a thirty-two page attack upon Taylor’s *Plato*, pouring scorn on Proclus and Plotinus; and the *Timaeus*, according to the Lowland Scots, was written only to expose the absurdity of the metaphysical system it set forth.”<sup>140</sup>

This is another hurdle for the defeated. Their documentation might survive, preserved through concealment, or concealed through neglect, ignorance or a failure of translation, finally to erupt into the written record of the winners. Centuries after their tragedy unfolded they may again find a voice - but finding an audience is a different matter. The historical record is subject to change, even to sudden and dramatic change, but the historical consensus tends to inertia. King Arthur, the subject of our enquiry, was the hero of a defeated people. John Morris, at one time a respected historian, thought to prove his historical importance by a careful analysis of neglected Celtic documents. His method, described in *The Age of Arthur*, was to “borrow from the techniques of the archaeologist”.<sup>141</sup> The surviving texts were the product of later centuries but they contained abstracts of earlier, lost texts which could be recovered once the later corruptions and distortions were removed. This method of textual analysis had been perfectly acceptable in the field of Biblical studies for well over a century. But from the Dark Age historians it met with ridicule.

This contempt is not reserved for Morris’ scholarship, it applies also to the people he studied, to the Dark Age Britons who failed to provide historians with an adequate written record. David Dumville begins his dismissal of the Celtic evidence with: “We might hope, in our more wildly optimistic moments, that our written sources would provide some clues... In particular, we might expect the Welsh literary sources, as deriving from a people which in the fifth century was equipped with men who could read and write Latin and who enjoyed a Roman standard of civilization, to tell us something of the development of Britain in the period 400 - 600”<sup>142</sup> and then concludes that every text but one can be dismissed as historically worthless - except perhaps a handful of poems and triads which are out of bounds to the historian until the philologists have finished with them. It does not surprise David Dumville or his supporters to find just one solitary British text surviving from the period. This is par for the course. The ‘Roman standard of civilization’ had departed by the mid-fifth century, and deprived of the benefits of direct Roman rule Britain slid inevitably into the sub-Roman period. Knowledge itself was wiped from men’s minds as the native Britons, like the Isaurians before them “returned to the savage manners from which they had never perfectly been reclaimed”.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Antiquity*, p5

<sup>141</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, xiv

<sup>142</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p174-5

<sup>143</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, see above, Chapter 3.3 *An Age of Darkness*

It is not the inadequacy of the Celtic evidence which caused historians to dismiss Morris' thesis so easily, rather, it is their contempt for the Celtic races which allowed them to dismiss the Celtic documents as inadequate, without asking why this is so. It is the verdict of history, not the verdict of textual analysis that has gone against the Celts. They lost, and history is written by the winning side. The losers don't have the same opportunity to pass their version on to posterity, and can seldom supply the authentic documents or the chain of provenance that academic historians feel entitled to demand. But they still can, on occasion, break into the written record and disturb the peace. When they do, the response is always the same - a damage limitation exercise. The academic consensus does at times change, usually as a result of political revolution. For the documentary evidence to cause such a shift it has to be absolutely overwhelming. And even that isn't always enough.

### **The Druids and Stonehenge**

The reason Dark Age historians have no doubt that a Celtic revival must have resulted in a Dark Age is that they have no doubt that the Celts were absolutely inferior to the Romans. They didn't arrive at this verdict through academic study, they inherited it from the Enlightenment. But the Enlightenment could find backing even for the most extreme elements of its view of the ancient Britons, the image of savages in skins, in the respectable written record of the ancient world. Which is to say, in the writings of their Roman enemies, more specifically in Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*: "By far the most civilized of the Britons are those who live in Kent, which is an entirely maritime area: their way of life is very like that of the Gauls. Most of the tribes living in the interior do not grow grain: they live on milk and meat and wear skins."<sup>144</sup>

We know better now. But they could have known better then. Whilst they did not have the scientific tools we have today for dating loom weights etc., still, someone could have observed that it was customary for a victorious general to return home laden with loot and captives, to be paraded at his triumph through the streets of Rome. But if Julius Caesar had not actually succeeded in conquering Britain he might well have needed an excuse for the lack of these evidences. The poet Lucan ridiculed his claim of a British victory, and that too is in the record.

But, in a period of imperialist expansion, the myth of the naked savages had its uses. It also had its consequences, in the field of scholarship. When the idea of a link between the druids and Stonehenge was first mooted, in the seventeenth century, Indigo Jones, an architect famous for his classical style, dismissed it precisely on the grounds of Caesar's verdict. The ancient Britons were "savage and barbarous people, knowing no use at all of garments... destitute of the knowledge... to erect stately structures, or such remarkable works as Stonehenge".<sup>145</sup> To Indigo Jones it was obvious: Stonehenge was built by the Romans.

Druidic Stonehenge has always been a Romantic notion for it implies a view of the defeated Celts directly opposed to that of Enlightened opinion; so far from being a people devoid of all culture they in fact supported a caste of philosopher priests who

<sup>144</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, V.14, trans. Anne & Peter Wiseman

<sup>145</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids*, p255

could build vast monuments oriented to the heavens. The notion is generally blamed on William Stukeley, who adopted a theory of John Aubrey and succeeded in linking Stonehenge and the druids indissolubly in the public mind. Professional historians and archaeologists have long laboured to dispel the delusion, pointing out that the ancient writers confined druidic worship to groves, and that this worship involved the horrible sacrifice of human beings. And indeed we do find all that in the record. But we also find accounts which fit precisely with the 'alternative' view of the druids. The earliest Greek references, continually recopied well into the Christian period, portray the druids as philosophers comparable to the Magi of the Persians, the Chaldeans among the Assyrians, and the Indian 'Gymnosophists', presumably Brahmins. Some held that they were Pythagorean initiates, others that Pythagoras was their pupil.

The Romantic and Enlightened views of the Ancient Britons and their druids are poles apart, yet both could find support in the same sources, even in the same text. The most spectacular account of druidic human sacrifice, the famous wicker man, comes from Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. He says that some of the Gauls perform their human sacrifices by filling a wicker colossus with living men, preferably criminals but at a push the innocent, then setting alight so that the victims "perish in a sheet of flame."<sup>146</sup> But in the same chapter of the same work he tells us that the druids teach reincarnation and the immortality of the soul and discourse on such exalted subjects as "the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth, the order of nature, the strength and the powers of the immortal gods"; they are highly respected, are not liable for taxes and hold aloof from war; their training can take as much as twenty years, as it requires the memorisation of a vast oral tradition; they are a pan-tribal organisation under a chief druid, meeting in conclave at certain times of the year in the territory of the Carnutes, believed to be the centre of Gaul, but that the source of their doctrine is Britain, and "even today those who want to study the doctrine in greater detail usually go to Britain to learn there." He also tells us that the druids do not think it right to commit their teachings to writing, "although for almost all other purposes, for example, for public and private accounts, they use the Greek alphabet,"

The druids themselves have left us with no documentation. Any written account of their beliefs and practices from the Celtic nations was composed after the introduction of Christianity, and is ruled out as too late and unreliable to count as historical evidence. So the written evidence is restricted to the classical texts, and they could support either view. Whether the druids were greenwood philosophers or bloodthirsty witch-doctors would depend on which elements from the Classical accounts you choose to select. That is, until the 1960s, when new evidence came to light.

Gerald Hawkins' *Stonehenge Decoded* was published in 1966. That Stonehenge was aligned to the solstice sun had long been observed, but Hawkins fed the astronomical data and a survey of the monument into a computer, and discovered "more alignments than had been dreamed of".<sup>147</sup> He concluded that Stonehenge was an astronomical calendar tracking the sun and moon over an 18.6 year cycle. It could predict eclipses. A year later, Alexander Thom's *Megalithic Sites in Britain* made public

<sup>146</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, VI. 13-14, trans. Anne & Peter Wiseman

<sup>147</sup> Giorgio de Santillana & Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*, p69



his painstaking survey of the stone circles of Britain - and there are hundreds of them. He demonstrated that the structures were precise geometrical figures based on Pythagorean triangles, laid out according to a standard unit of measurement, the megalithic yard. Which is to say, the builders had a unified organisation and an advanced knowledge of astronomy and geometry. Classical writers had said the druids' teachings were Pythagorean, and now here was evidence of an organised cult with 'Pythagorean' knowledge among the ancient inhabitants of Britain.

The academic response was a textbook demonstration of the fact that the Enlightenment consensus is pretty much impervious to new evidence. Richard Atkinson pointed out that as the builders of Stonehenge were "howling barbarians" any alignments must be down to coincidence.<sup>148</sup> Jacquetta Hawkes hinted at the role of overactive imaginations: "every age has the Stonehenge it deserves - or desires."<sup>149</sup> Aubrey Burl lamented this new druidic metamorphosis: the old Romantic view of "gentle philosophers and proto-Christians rather than the blood-spattered priests of Roman historians" was quite bad enough, but the new evidence has led to a still worse perversion: "Delusion was succeeded by illusion, like the genial Mr Jekyll's transfiguration into the undesirable Mr Hyde, the druid did not vanish. He changed. Abandoning religion he mutated into a scientific astronomer priest obsessed with lunar mechanics."<sup>150</sup> And Stuart Piggott brought out a book on the druids with the primary objective of heading off the new evidence.

Not that that was his declared intention. Indeed there is no mention of Thom or Hawkins in Piggott's *The Druids*. But that their works were the inspiration, or more correctly the provocation, for his book is plainly demonstrated in its closing paragraph: "Can we dare hope that the Druids will once more come into their own, backed by a fine confusion of Hyperborean myth and the lasting bronze of the Coligny Calendar, and that our own age too may have the Druids it desires, who, white robes exchanged for white laboratory coats, will be astronomers writing computer programmes in Gallo-Brittonic?"

Piggott's *The Druids*, for long the only book on the subject to be found in any library or bookshop, did not bring anything new to the debate but was simply a restatement of the old orthodoxy. Piggott admits as much himself, declaring that his own work shows its indebtedness to T D Kendrick's 1920s *The Druids* "on every page".<sup>151</sup> But at least he made that orthodoxy and its supporting arguments available to anyone who wished to examine it. It won't stand up

He opens his case with a familiar warning. Before considering the evidence we must bear in mind R G Collingwood's threefold division of a past-in-itself, a past-as-known, and "that very dangerous thing, a past-as-wished-for, in which a convenient selection of the evidence is fitted into a predetermined intellectual or emotional pattern". He then proceeds to show how to select the evidence to produce his preferred image of druids, starting with the observation that "there has been a

<sup>148</sup> Giorgio de Santillana & Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*, p69

<sup>149</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p167

<sup>150</sup> Aubrey Burl, *From Carnac to Callanish*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1993, p14

<sup>151</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p4

process of manufacturing druids-as-wished-for going on since classical times".<sup>152</sup>

To understand the image of the druids in the ancient world, Piggott argues, we must borrow from the methodology and terminology of the history of ideas. Nora Chadwick's analysis of the Classical references, he reminds us, outlined two groups, the Alexandrian and the Posidonian tradition, the former stemming from the literary tradition of Alexandria, the intellectual capital of the ancient world, and the latter originating in the writings of a Greek writer, Posidonius, who actually visited Gaul in the first century BC. These agree precisely, Piggott continues, with the categories of certain historians of ideas, who distinguish two distinct attitudes to 'primitive' races, termed hard and soft primitivism. Soft primitivism is characterised by the tendency of more civilized cultures to project an ideal of the Noble Savage onto alien, far-off races. Only distance makes this possible. Hard primitivism results from actual contact with more primitive cultures, and is thus inevitably a far less favourable view. The Alexandrian tradition, which views druids as philosophers comparable to the Pythagoreans, is a result of soft primitivism, druids imagined at a safe distance. This begins with a fragment from a lost work of Sotion of Alexandria, circa 200 AD, and continues through to the Christian period, to Clement of Alexandria, Cyril and Origen, but, Piggott states, "it is all second-hand library work, with no new empirical observations from first-hand informants or from field-work among the Celtic peoples".<sup>153</sup> The Posidonian tradition, on the other hand, is from actual contact; it is 'empirical', 'realistic', 'druids-as-known'.

But in fact, nothing of Posidonius' writings survives. All we have is acknowledged quotes or traceable borrowings in later writers - three later writers, in Piggott's account, Julius Caesar, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, which writers he calls primary sources. So the Posidonian tradition is just as much second-hand as the Alexandrian. As for 'empirical observation', we have only one claim to that, from Cicero, Caesar's contemporary and the most famous Roman advocate of his day. Cicero names his informant: Diviciacus, a Gallic druid who visited Rome on a diplomatic mission in the period. Some scholars hold that Diviciacus was the source for some of Caesar's information on the druids - their political organisation and regular meetings in the centre of Gaul, their belief that their doctrine originated in Britain - but as he doesn't say so himself this is not a direct claim, but a deduction. Cicero stands alone, and what he tells us is that Diviciacus "claimed to have that knowledge of nature which the Greeks call 'physiologia', and he used to make predictions, sometimes by means of augury and sometimes by means of conjecture."<sup>154</sup> It's not much, but it does tend towards the favourable, so Stuart Piggott can't possibly allow it to be empirical. It stems, he says, from the same literary tradition that had Roman historians writing speeches to put in the mouths of such characters as Boudicca.

There was such a literary tradition among Classical, and indeed, medieval, historians. At this time the historian's role, as they and their readers understood it, was not merely to relate the known historical facts, but to edify and to entertain their

<sup>152</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p3

<sup>153</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p86

<sup>154</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione*, I, XLV, 90 - see T D Kendrick, *The Druids*, p80

readers. When they penned appropriate speeches for their characters they acknowledged what they were doing, and their readers were under no illusion that some Roman war correspondent had been present to record the actual words spoken. But Cicero's statement is not of this genre. Diviciacus was present in Rome, and Cicero says they did converse. If Diviciacus never said any of this, then Cicero's claim is not some literary convention but a straight lie. We have no reason to accuse him. The simple fact is, we have one favourable reference to the druids with a credible claim to be first-hand. But as no scholar believes any Roman or Greek writer actually witnessed a druidic human sacrifice, all the 'hard primitivist' evidence is second-hand.

And philosophers are not alone in their tendency towards fantasy and projection. Hard primitivism results from direct contact with more primitive peoples - in other words, at the point when they are found to be in the way of the expansion of the more 'advanced' race. I'd say this provides a more powerful motive for creating a false image of the 'primitives' concerned, and for well-documented example of the same we have the North American settlers' fantasy of the savage 'Red Indians'. And it is demonstrably the case that the unfavourable image of the Celts and their druids was used to justify Roman Imperialism. The Roman writer Pliny, who gives a contemptuous account of druidic magical practices and tells us that Britannia, especially, is "fascinated by magic and performs its rites with so much ceremony that it almost seems as though it was she who had imparted the cult to the Persians", concludes his description with: "Therefore we cannot too highly appreciate our debt to the Romans for having put an end to this monstrous cult, whereby to murder a man was an act of the greatest devoutness, and to eat his flesh most beneficial."<sup>155</sup>

This accusation of cannibalism adds considerable weight to the possibility that the hostile Roman view of the druids is itself a fantasy. Piggott misses its significance. He presents the Roman persecution as proof of druidic human sacrifice: "If we ask of Celtic religion, in a famous phrase used by Edward Gibbon in another context, 'what new provocation could exasperate the mild indifference of antiquity', the answer is human sacrifice, a practice beyond all others abhorrent by the end of the pagan era".<sup>156</sup> But the case is actually reverse.

Piggott is from the Enlightenment tradition, so is naturally prepared to credit the 'mild indifference of antiquity'. But the Enlightenment notion of Roman religious toleration is itself a fantasy, a projection onto their own Golden Age of an ideal born out of Europe's harrowing experience in the wars of religion which followed the Reformation. It completely misconstrues the nature of Roman religious belief. The Romans were polytheists: they had no dogmatic adherence to one jealous god. Religion for them was a matter of ritual rather than dogma. A demand for religious conformity, then, would be for ritual conformity. Rome did make that demand. All subjects of the Empire must sacrifice to the Emperor, failure to do so being

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<sup>155</sup> Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, XXX 13 - see T D Kendrick, *The Druids*, p90

<sup>156</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p16

punishable by death.<sup>157</sup> The Romans accepted the existence of foreign gods and alien cults. They usually equated the former to their own deities, and permitted the practice of the latter concurrent with the imperial cults. This is not religious toleration, it is absorption. The Romans simply didn't suppress what they did not perceive to be a threat: They had no conceivable motive for doing so. But any cult which was regarded as a threat was extirpated.

The case of the Christians, thrown to the lions in the Roman arena for the entertainment of the mob, is familiar to most people. Rome's apologists explain this as stemming jointly from the Christian's refusal to sacrifice to the Emperor, which looked like disloyalty, and from the Romans' misunderstanding of the Eucharistic meal, which sounded like ritual human sacrifice - in short, it was a case of mistaken identity. It was no such thing. The early Christians were indeed hostile to the Roman state; it was an agent of the devil in their view. On the Roman side, the accusations which justified their persecution of the Christians - incestuous orgies, child sacrifice, cannibalism - did not result from any accidental misunderstanding of the Christian ritual meal. Norman Cohn in *Europe's Inner Demons*, his contribution to the series *Studies in the dynamics of persecution and extermination*, has shown that this image, which reappeared in the European witch-hunts a thousand years later, was the final development of a stereotype deliberately conjured up by the Roman authorities, a form of black propaganda by which enemies of the state were labelled enemies of humanity. Christian sacraments were not the first to be so misinterpreted: the cult of the Bacchanalia met the same fate two centuries before the crucifixion. Less successful efforts were made to so stigmatise the Jews. And Roman historians accused individual political conspirators against the state of human sacrifice and cannibalism, often retrospectively.

Dio Cassius' account of the Catiline conspiracy is written some three centuries after the event. His story is that Catiline, in order to bind his co-conspirators irrevocably to his wicked plan, had them sacrifice a boy, swear an oath over his entrails and eat them in a ritual meal. Had anything like this occurred, Cohn points out, the conspiracy's most vocal opponent, Cicero, who had a great deal to say against Catiline, would surely not have omitted it. So when the same Dio Cassius tells us that the Egyptian Bucolic war was initiated by the rebels sacrificing a Roman centurion, swearing an oath over his entrails, and then devouring the same, we have, as Cohn observes, no good reason to believe him.<sup>158</sup>

Then logically we have no good reason to believe him either when he describes equally shocking atrocities committed by British rebels against Rome. Yet some do. Kendrick in *The Druids*, for instance: "It is certainly very difficult to minimise the revolting nature of the holocausts in the wicker cages, or of such episodes as the cruel slaughter of her female captives by Boadicea, in honour of Adraste."<sup>159</sup> Kendrick

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<sup>157</sup> An exception was made of the Jews, as their religion prevented compliance with this demand. Instead a twice daily sacrifice was made in the temple at Jerusalem on behalf of the Emperor and the Roman people. The cessation of this sacrifice in 66 AD marked the start of the first Jewish revolt against Rome.

<sup>158</sup> Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, p6

<sup>159</sup> T D Kendrick, *The Druids*, p121

is right, at least, in bracketing these two tales together. They are both Roman atrocity stories designed to justify Roman atrocities, and neither has any credible evidence to back them. Dio Cassius graphically describes how the Britons tortured the noble Roman matrons whom they captured, stripping them naked, cutting off their breasts and sewing them to their mouths "in order to make the victims appear to be eating them", then impaling them with skewers run lengthwise through the entire body, all the while engaging in "sacrifices, banquets, and wanton behaviour"<sup>160</sup> in the sacred grove of their bloodthirsty goddess of victory. But Dio Cassius, who lards his history with fiction, never came near Britain, and surely never got hold of an eye-witness report. How likely is it that any witness to such atrocities would have survived to report them? Equally, the story of the wicker man is about as credible as Catiline's cannibalism, though its source is apparently the lost works of Posidonius.

It is quite probable that Posidonius observed and reported the burning of a wicker image among the Celts. This still occurs here every Guy Fawkes Night, and it is accepted that the custom long predates the Gunpowder plot. The original purpose, it is thought, was to start the New Year (the Celtic New Year began in autumn) with the ritual removal of evil, or perhaps ill-luck, by burning it in effigy. Guy Fawkes became the Protestant image of evil. At the famous Lewis bonfire they still ritually burn the Pope. Hindus annually celebrate Rama's defeat of the evil Ravana by burning a colossus of that demon. But stuffing a wicker colossus with living beings and keeping it upright and its contents alive long enough to die 'in a sheet of flame', seems to me to present certain logistical problems. Caesar never saw it, nor did Strabo. We have no evidence Posidonius ever said it.

But at least it's different. Stuart Piggott would have it the 'hard primitivist' view of the druids stemmed from first-hand observation, but as direct contact between the Romans and the Celts increased with the conquest first of Gaul and then Britain, so the unfavourable image of the druids drew ever closer to the Roman stereotype of the anti-human outlined in Cohn's research. Piggott's 'primary sources', Strabo, Caesar and Diodorus Siculus, describe a colourful variety of druidic methods of human sacrifice; victims might be stabbed, impaled, shot with arrows or burned in a wicker colossus, but there is no suggestion they were afterwards eaten.<sup>161</sup> Strabo, writing around 8 BC, is aware of the stereotype, but he applies it to the Irish, a race so far removed from Rome they must be capable of any bestiality. (He tells us they not only ate their dead parents but had sexual intercourse with their mothers and sisters, though to his credit he does add that he has no reliable authority for this). It is not until the following century - Pliny is writing in 77 AD - that the druids are accused, like other enemies of the Roman state, of cannibalising the victims of their dreadful rites, and by that time persecution of the priesthood was well under way.

Expressions of Roman abhorrence at their barbaric practices run precisely parallel to Roman persecution of the druids themselves. Strabo coolly refers to customs "opposed to our usage" which the Romans put a stop to. Suetonius tells us the

<sup>160</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 62.7, trans. Bill Thayer, on LacusCurtius on the University of Chicago website

<sup>161</sup> see T D Kendrick, *The Druids*, p78-84

Emperor Claudius "very thoroughly suppressed the barbarous and inhuman religion of the druids in Gaul, which in the time of Augustus had merely been forbidden to Roman citizens." Pomponius Mela, writing in the time of the Claudian suppression, refers to "atrocious customs" and the poet Lucan addressing the druids during the reign of Claudius' successor Nero, speaks of "your barbarous ceremonies" and "the savage usage of your holy rites". Pliny, a short while later, recounts an anecdote of an individual executed by Claudius for his use of a druidic charm, tells of an earlier suppression by Tiberius of the Gallic druids "and the whole tribe of diviners and physicians" and tops his account of the druids' ludicrous superstitions with a paean to Rome for having rid the lands under her dominion of "this monstrous cult", which, he claims, involved both human sacrifice and cannibalism. Soon after, Tacitus describes the Roman attack on Anglesey, intended to exterminate the cult in what was thought to be its British stronghold: "Their groves, devoted to inhuman superstitions, were destroyed. They deemed it, indeed, a duty to cover their alters with the blood of captives and to consult their deities through human entrails."<sup>162</sup> At last entrails enter the picture, and only just in time. After Tacitus, the 'hard primitivist' view of the druids fades from the written record - at the same time as the actual druids cease to present any political threat to Roman rule.

The 'hard primitivist' writings coincide with the Roman conquest of the Celtic provinces. Historians accept the druids were a political threat to Roman dominion, and indeed that they organised resistance to it: Caesar's account of the druids pan-tribal authority presents the possibility, and Tacitus provides specific examples. This is reason enough for their suppression. The unfavourable view of the druids finally approximates to the stereotype of the anti-human which Roman writers conventionally applied to forbidden cults and other conspiracies against the state. If their writings are not evidence of such practices by other groups so accused - and no historian accepts the early Christians were guilty of such atrocities - then they cannot be evidence against the druids either.

This does not mean that the druids did not practice human sacrifice. They may have done, but the Classical texts are not valid evidence for this. And human sacrifice would not in itself disprove the existence of an intellectual culture and mystical tradition among the pre-Roman Celts, nor even the druids' descent from the megalith builders. The Inca and the Maya also practised human sacrifice: that doesn't mean they had no culture worth preserving. And we have a more pertinent example in the Romans themselves. No-one doubts the high intellectual culture of the Classical world, yet it coincided with the barbarities of the Roman arena. And the gladiatorial contests themselves apparently derive from a ritual of human sacrifice, Etruscan in origin. And then there is the case of Augustus Caesar, accused of performing a vast human sacrifice in 40 AD. According to the historian Suetonius, in the civil war following the death of Julius Caesar his great-nephew, then still called Octavian, sacrificed three hundred of the defenders of the fortress of Perugia "like victims on the Ides of March at

<sup>162</sup> Strabo, *Geographica*, IV, 4, c, 198, 5; Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25; Pomponius Mela, *De Situ Orbis*, III, 2, 18 & 19; Lucan, *Pharsalia*, I, 450-8; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, XXIX, 52 & XXX 13; Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 30 - see T D Kendrick, *The Druids*, p83-93

the alter erected to the Deified Julius".<sup>163</sup> Others repeat the story, and agree the interpretation. Of course it could still be just another tall tale, and it is admittedly difficult to distinguish between human sacrifice and the ritual execution of prisoners of war, whether performed by druids or Roman Emperors. But if so specific an incident were related of a Celtic ruler, would the question of interpretation even arise?

And finally to return to Stonehenge, and the vexed subject of the Druid connection. Despite academic outrage, there is no escaping the fact that the evidence we have is all in favour, none against. The druids are defined as the priests of the Iron Age Celts, but we have no evidence for the migration of Iron Age Celts into these islands, replacing an earlier Bronze Age population. From this fact a few historians and archaeologists have recently reached the surprising conclusion that the Celts never actually existed, but were invented by Romantics in the eighteenth century. There are more logical inferences to be drawn: "Between the stone circle builders and the druids there was no major wave of incomers in the British Isles. It could therefore be claimed with some validity that Stonehenge was indeed built by Bronze Age 'druids'".<sup>164</sup>

The name doesn't make the thing. What we are looking for is evidence of continuity of population, and of rite and belief. The megalithic monuments continued to be venerated well into the Christian period. Churches were built within them - it was an established policy to convert pagan sacred sites to Christian use, a policy specifically advocated by Pope Gregory the Great, in a letter to St. Augustine of Canterbury preserved in Bede's history. And the Church and her lay supporters were for centuries engaged in attempts to suppress the continued veneration of the stones themselves. The council of Tours in 567, for example, exhorts churchmen "to expel from the Church all those whom they may see performing before certain stones things which have no relation with the ceremonies of the Church." Centuries later Charlemagne, who destroyed the Irminsul, the sacred pillar of the pagan Saxons, was still struggling to eradicate pagan practices among his own people: "with respect to trees, stones and fountains, where certain foolish people light torches or practice other superstitions, we earnestly ordain that that most evil custom, detestable to God, wherever it should be found, should be removed and destroyed"<sup>165</sup> A case has even been made for druidic use of Stonehenge in historic times. Nikolai Tolstoy in *The Quest for Merlin*, suggests it was the British Omphalos, the sacred centre of the land, its use as a temple kept secret in the Roman period and revived in the time of Vortigern. Certainly there is no question that the veneration of megalithic sites survived among the peasantry, so if these sites were not held sacred by the druids, we would have to suppose that veneration lapsed for over a millennium, and then revived at the dawn (or should I say dusk) of the Dark Ages. Besides, there is one telling piece of evidence against this, to be found in that most unlikely of places, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*.

Geoffrey made use of earlier British traditions, that is an accepted fact. Amongst those earlier traditions is an account of the building of Stonehenge, which Geoffrey

<sup>163</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars, Augustus*, 15, trans. Robert Graves

<sup>164</sup> Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, *The Origins of Britain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p164

<sup>165</sup> see W Y Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, p427-8

has turned into fable: The Giant's Ring, as Geoffrey calls Stonehenge, was brought by Merlin from Ireland to Britain and erected on Salisbury plain to commemorate the British nobles treacherously slain by the Saxons at a peace conference. Of course the date is out by tens of centuries, but the odd thing is, the bluestones were transported to Stonehenge. The nearest source of the stone is the Prescelly mountains in Wales, which it is generally assumed they came from. One maverick archaeologist holds Geoffrey was precisely right; that there is an Irish source of the bluestones exactly where Geoffrey indicates which, though further away, would have been far more accessible, given the transport technologies of the day.<sup>166</sup> And Stuart Piggott himself once argued that Geoffrey must have got hold of a 'folk memory' of the bluestones being brought from Wales.<sup>167</sup>

Somehow our native oral tradition transmitted a fragment of genuine information from the megalithic period right through to the Middle Ages. Then that information was carried through the Celtic Iron Age. Folk memory doesn't begin to cover it. The Classical writers tell us that in their day in Britain there existed a specialised learned class which transmitted its knowledge orally in order to preserve it secret and inviolate, and took up to twenty years to train its members for that role. We are looking at a chain of transmission.

### **The Celts and Reincarnation**

So, was the Alexandrian tradition wrong about the druids? The 'philosophical' world view of the Pythagoreans, Neoplatonists and Hermetists, in common with the Taoist, Hindus, and many other ancient traditions around word, believed in a golden past of knowledge and wisdom, a remnant of which was believed to have survived in the mystery cults. The druids, in their view, were just such a mystery cult. And we now have indisputable evidence that the geometry of Pythagoras (and geometry was a sacred science to the Pythagoreans) was known to the builders of the megaliths over two thousand years before the Roman invasion of Britain, and that the druids were in some sense heir to that tradition.

Stuart Piggott holds the equation of the druids to the Pythagoreans was a mistake. That the druids taught both reincarnation and the immortality of the soul is attested by many Classical writers, including that hard primitivist Julius Caesar. How, then, to dismiss it? Piggott's method is as follows: Caesar's source was Posidonius, a hard primitivist with a soft centre. For all his personal observation, Posidonius was still a philosopher, with a philosopher's tendency to fantasise about primitive Golden Ages. The druids did believe in an afterlife, a strange belief to the Classical writers. The nearest they knew of it was the Pythagorean doctrine, so they ended up equating the one with the other. But, says Piggott, so far from holding the Pythagoreans' sophisticated belief in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, careful reading of Classical texts proves the barbarian druids thought only in terms of a "naive, literal and

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<sup>166</sup> T C Lethbridge, *The Legend of the Sons of God*, Arkana, London, 1990, p8-12

<sup>167</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Sources of Geoffrey of Monmouth: II The Stonehenge Story*. *Antiquity* 15, 1941, p307-319



vivid reliving of an exact counterpart of earthly life beyond the grave”<sup>168</sup>

There is no denying that such an interpretation can be drawn from the brief references in the Classical sources, if selectively employed. But the Classical sources are not all we have. **There are Celtic texts which establish beyond doubt that the Celts did believe in reincarnation.** It may seem ludicrous to modern historians that these primitives should espouse so philosophical a doctrine: Shakespeare found it equally laughable, mocking it in the line: "I was never so be-rhymed since Pythagoras' time, that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember."<sup>169</sup> But it is clearly there in the record.

In *The Book of the Dun Cow*, for example, there is the story of King Mongan's dispute with his poet Forgoll, concerning the place of death of Fothad Airgdech, an enemy of Finn Mac Cumail, slain three centuries previously by Cailte, one of the Fianna. The dispute grew heated, and Mongan ended up staking his wife on the outcome, assuring the tearful queen that she was in no danger. The matter was finally settled by the intervention of a cloaked man bearing a headless spear-shaft, who proved Mongan's case by directing the witnesses to where they would find the grave of Fothad Airgdech, detailing his jewellery, his inscription, even position of the missing iron spear point, detached when striking fatal blow. For the cloaked man was himself Fothad's slayer, the spirit of Cailte returned to save Mongan's honour. In doing so he reveals what Mongan himself had rather kept quiet: "We were with thee, with Finn," said the warrior. "Hush!" said Mongan, "that is not fair." "We were with Finn, then," said he. In case we missed the point, the narrator reiterates: "It was Cailte, Finn's foster-son, that had come to them. Mongan, however, was Finn, though he would not let it be told."<sup>170</sup>

That seems pretty unequivocal, and it doesn't stand alone. W Y Evans Wentz devotes a whole chapter to the Celtic belief in reincarnation in his *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*. Apart from numerous examples in ancient sources, he records verbal testimony showing the belief had been widespread throughout the Celtic world within living memory, and still survived in pockets when he wrote, in 1911. For example: In Penwith, the western tip of Cornwall, on the hill of Tolcarne above Newlyn there lived a troll who, if invoked properly, would reveal one's previous lives. And again: In 1909 a Breton woman found herself surrounded, in a cemetery, by the spirits of children begging her for a chance to reincarnate. But this, I think, is his most telling example: "A highly educated Irishman now living in California tells me of his own knowledge that there was a popular and sincere belief among many of the Irish people throughout Ireland that Charles Parnell, their great champion in modern times, was the reincarnation of one of the old Gaelic heroes."<sup>171</sup>

This same belief in the deliberate incarnation of gods and heroes for benefit of their worshippers is held by other races who are not regarded as primitives. The Hindus have a word for them: Avatars. The term was borrowed by mystics and poets of the

<sup>168</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, p103

<sup>169</sup> Spoken by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, act 3 scene 2.

<sup>170</sup> Academy for Ancient Texts, [www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/mongan.html](http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/mongan.html)

<sup>171</sup> W Y Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, p385

Irish Literary Renaissance. George Russell in 1896 wrote to W B Yeats: "The gods have returned to Erin and have centred themselves in the sacred mountains... There is a hurrying of forces and swift things going out and I believe profoundly that a new Avatar is about to appear... It will be one of the kingly Avatars, who is at once ruler of men and magic sage. I have had a vision of him some months ago and will know him if he appears."<sup>172</sup> The classical writers tell us the Celts believed in reincarnation and two thousand years later we find they believed it still. It's not likely the idea disappeared with the arrival of Christianity and was later reintroduced to a Christian peasantry. It never went away, it persisted throughout the Christian period. This fact is, of course, intensely relevant to any study of Arthur.

Relevant, but seldom observed: The trend in twentieth-century academia is towards specialisation. Historians dealing with Arthur's period cannot be expected to acquaint themselves with Celtic superstitions, modern or medieval. They deal with Dark Age evidence. David Dumville, misinterpreting John Rhys, advances the suggestion that Arthur was a deity as proof against his being an historical character - obviously quite unaware that the two were not, for the Celts, mutually exclusive categories.

### **Bruti Britones**

In the context of the Celtic belief in reincarnation, the 'hope of the Britons', their passionate faith in Arthur's return, is not evidence against his existence, but evidence for his historical importance. The anti-Arthur camp entirely misunderstands the situation, assuming Arthur was only accepted as an historical character because the pre-Enlightenment intellect was incapable of distinguishing history from legend. So David Dumville denounces Morris and Alcock for treating our 'once and future king' as a real historical figure, and accuses them of medieval historiography. Yet his own view is equally medieval.

The medieval world was not 'taken in' by Geoffrey's history. His most famous detractor was from his own century. William of Newburgh originated the idea that Geoffrey was a fraud. Later historians merely swallowed this notion - no study of Geoffrey's work could possibly have produced it. This debt which the modern understanding of Arthur owes to a medieval judgement is acknowledged, in a backhanded way. William of Newburgh is known as the father of modern historical criticism in consequence of his vehement attack on Geoffrey and his rejection of Arthur as an historical character, and for no other reason. This exaltation of William serves to camouflage the true position: Instead of Geoffrey's modern detractors being convicted of a medieval view, it is William who is modern. This judgement has led to a complete misunderstanding of both William's and Geoffrey's motives and of the significance of Arthur in their period, for it has meant that historians fail to take into account the actual circumstances impinging on these two men as they wrote.

It is anachronistic to think William could have been motivated by the modern concerns of historical criticism, even if his accusations against Geoffrey have a deceptively modern ring. On the surface they look like an observation regarding the

<sup>172</sup> see Ulick O'Connor, *Celtic Dawn, A Portrait of the Irish Literary Renaissance*, Black Swan, London, 1985, p162

inadequacy of Geoffrey's sources. Geoffrey claimed his history was a translation of a British book given him by Walter of Oxford, but William insisted there was no such book. Geoffrey, he tells us, had no source but the lying tales of the Britons, which he inflated with his own inventions and disguised as a genuine history by writing in Latin. Lying tales is, of course, a reference to the British oral tradition. And while it is the case that modern historians tend to share William's assessment of the value of oral tradition, we should still observe the basis on which he makes it.

William assures us the British oral tradition is not to be credited because the British are so stupid a race (the Latin is *bruti*) that they "still look for Arthur as if he would return, and will not listen to any one who says that he is dead".<sup>173</sup> The only histories we can credit, for this period, are those of Bede and Gildas. Why? Because Gildas is contemporary source and Bede makes such careful and considered use of his sources? Well no. It is because, unlike Geoffrey, they are honest.

This is not historical criticism, it is a simple denunciation spiced with personal and racial abuse. And the reason for William's attack is disguised if we ignore its historical context, the Papal Reformation of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. William was a propagandist for that movement.

The Papal Reformation began in the monastery of Cluny as a determined return to the purity of the original Benedictine rule. It soon turned outwards in the belief, provoked by the approach of the Millennium, that the entire world must be reformed on monastic lines. The Church must be freed from worldly corruption, from the abuses of simony, nepotism and lay investiture, of clerical marriage and concubinage. The reformed Church could then exercise its proper authority over the laity, so that instead of the world corrupting the Church, the Church could spiritualise the world. By 1049, with the election of Leo IX, the Cluniac Reformers had captured the papacy, and the reform of society could begin.

It was to be a reform from the top, and the top, so far as the Reformers were concerned, was the pope. This was an intensely authoritarian movement, aiming to strengthen the bonds of authority in all sections of society; rulers over their subjects, husbands and fathers over their wives and children, bishops and abbots over their flocks, and the pope over all Christendom. It was the Reformers, particularly Pope Gregory VII, who initiated the papal conflict with the empire which was ultimately to undermine them both. But before that there were other casualties.

A movement which originated in a quest for moralistic reform turned rapidly into a drive for power. The Reformers took over the papacy and the Church, the Church extended her power over the laity, and the laity, encouraged by Church, extended bounds of the Christendom by military means. It was a Reforming pope, Urban II, who preached the first Crusade in 1096. 'The expansion of Latin Christendom' was underway.

The phrase is from Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe*. Bartlett shows that European imperial expansion, usually seen as post-Renaissance phenomenon, actually began in the eleventh century, and the Papal Reformation played a seminal

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<sup>173</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, preface

role. In this period the western Christian world began to develop a collective identity which was not merely religious, but quasi-racial. Western Christians adopted collective, racial terms for themselves, *gens Latina* 'the Latin people', in contradistinction to the Greek-speaking Christians; or 'the Franks', the heirs to Charlemagne's western Roman Empire. Not that Western Christendom was limited to the borders of Charlemagne's old empire. One could almost say it included all those for whom Latin was the language of sacred ritual and of learning, and who looked to the pope in Rome as their spiritual head: Almost, but not quite!

Latin Christendom expanded in four directions. Best known of the west's imperial conquests is the crusade to the Holy Land which, in the Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem, established a temporary outpost in the Middle East. A more permanent success against Islam was the reconquest of Spain, a gradual process which in this era received the same papal backing and encouragement as the crusades to the Holy Land. Less well known is the drive to the east, into Slavic Europe, large parts of which were still pagan until well into the Middle Ages. This was largely subdued by the Teutonic knights, cousins of the Templars. The fourth region, the one which concerns us here, is the Celtic fringe.

The expansion of Latin Christendom occurred at the expense of the Celtic races. Bartlett regards this as an anomaly in need of elucidation. If what defined Latin Christendom was 'the Roman obedience', the ritual use of Latin and the recognition of papal authority, then it ought to have included the Celtic nations. But as Bartlett shows they were treated in exactly the same way as the Muslim south and the pagan east, subject to a process of conquest and colonisation encouraged and orchestrated by the Reforming papacy. In explanation Bartlett suggests the 'barbarian' lifestyle of the Celtic nations marked them out as alien: "Although the Irish were of ancient Christian faith and shared the creed of Frankish Europe, they exhibited pronounced differences in culture and social organisation. The absence of a territorial, tithe-funded church or unitary kingship, the very distinctive system of kinship and the non-feudal, uncommercialised economy struck Latin clergy and Frankish aristocrats as outlandish."<sup>174</sup>

The Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland was undertaken, as the invaders claimed, to expand the boundaries of the Church. The Reformer St. Bernard of Clairvaux denounced the Irish for their "barbarism" and their "beastlike ways". The Irish Reformer St. Malachy celebrated the conquest of his own nation with the words: "Barbarous laws were abolished, Roman laws introduced; everywhere the customs of the Church were received, those that were contrary rejected... everything was so much changed for the better that today we can apply to that people the word which the Lord speaks to us through the prophet: 'Them which were not my people, Thou art my people.'"<sup>175</sup>

The Irish were not Roman, not part of the *gens Latina*, they were barbarian, beastlike - that is, *bruti*. And so were the British.

It was in the twelfth century, just around the time Geoffrey was writing *The History of*

<sup>174</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*, p22

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

the Kings of Britain, that the word 'barbarian' was beginning to be applied to the Welsh. John Gillingham<sup>176</sup> traces the transition. William of Malmesbury was the first historian to so describe the Welsh, in 1125. Previously, in the post-Roman world, the word barbarian had been used purely of non-Christians, the Danes for instance. But the Reformers, like the Renaissance scholars a few centuries later, while promoting the view of themselves as heirs to the old Roman Empire were also engaged in reviving classical learning. William revived the classical use of 'barbarian' as a term of abuse for non-Romans, to which category the Celtic races plainly belonged - as had the Saxons before intermarriage with the Franks caused them to adopt the more civilized lifestyle and polished manners of their neighbours. William's terminology rapidly caught on among his fellow historians. The author of the *Gesta Stephani* describes the Welsh as 'men of animal type'. Henry of Huntingdon specifies one distinguishing feature of these semi-bestial races - they had no histories.

It was only a decade after William of Malmesbury renamed the Welsh barbarians that Geoffrey's history exploded onto the scene. As Henry of Huntingdon testifies, describing his reaction on first coming across the book in the abbey of Bec in January 1139, it came as a huge surprise. Very little was known of British history at the time. Geoffrey himself remarks, in the very opening of his book, on the lack of British written histories: "apart from such mention of them as Gildas and Bede had each made in a brilliant book on the subject, I have not been able to discover anything at all on the kings who lived here before the Incarnation of Christ, or indeed about Arthur and all the others who followed on after the Incarnation". But then Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, presented him with an ancient book in the British language and asked him to translate it.

Geoffrey's history, Gillingham shows, was written to refute the portrayal of the British by contemporary historians, as a people who had no history, no agriculture, no cities, but like the brute beasts existed on hunting and plants gathered from the wild. Geoffrey admits the charge and explains it: The first inhabitants of the island of Britain, Brutus the Trojan and his followers, during their wanderings had chosen to live "on flesh and herbs, as though they were beasts"<sup>177</sup> rather than submit to Greek slavery. The same choice was forced on their descendants by the Saxon conquest of the fertile lands of Loegria. They chose freedom and a hard life in the Welsh hills. But before this - and most emphatically, before the arrival of the Romans - the British had lived in the good lands of Britain as a civilized people.

So soon as the Britons had secured the island, Geoffrey tells us, they began to civilize it, building houses and cultivating the fields. Brutus himself founded the first city in Britain, and gave his people their first law code "that they might live peacefully together". Britain's second city, York (Eboracum), was founded by Ebraucus, Brutus' great-great-grandson. Bath and Carlisle were founded by the British kings Bladud and Leil - not, as William of Malmesbury asserted, by Julius Caesar. Leicester was founded by King Leir. Geoffrey names the British founders of ten British cities, and tells us there were twenty-eight in all (in agreement with Gildas and 'Nennius'), some

<sup>176</sup> John Gillingham, *The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History*, p105-110

<sup>177</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, l.4, p56

of them ruined since the arrival of the pagan Saxons but many still inhabited, still containing the shrines of the saints "where whole companies of men and women offer praise to God according to the Christian tradition."<sup>178</sup> Britain was a Christian country long before Constantine converted the Roman Empire, in Geoffrey's account - and in Bede's.

Britain's roads, likewise, were built before the Romans came - by Belinus, son of King Dunvallo Molmutius, a Cornishman who rescued the crown of Britain after a disastrous civil war among Brutus' descendants. It was Dunvallo Molmutius who promulgated the Molmutine code, a law code which protected cities, temples, roads, and ploughs - in short, the essentials of civilized life. Another British law code was devised by a woman (Geoffrey is a remarkably feminist writer): The Lex Martiana, called the Mercian Code by the Saxons, is named from Queen Marcia, the highly accomplished wife of King Guithelin, Belinus' grandson. Geoffrey makes these British law codes the basis of English law - King Alfred rewrote them in English!

The monks of the twelfth-century Renaissance saw Britain before the Romans in exactly the same light as the Enlightenment - a wilderness inhabited by barbarians. Geoffrey's history flatly contradicts them. The British, in his account, were as ancient and noble a race as the Romans, originating like them in the city of Troy. They were civilized. Though they had been conquered by the Romans and incorporated into their empire, prior to that the Britons, under the leadership of King Belinus and his brother Brennius, had conquered Rome. During the period of Roman rule two of the emperors, Constantine and Maximianus, were actually Britons. And it was the Britons themselves who, under Arthur, defeated the invading pagan Saxons when Rome had deserted the province. All this is summarised in the speech King Arthur makes to his vassals when, at the pinnacle of his success, he is challenged by a Rome which still claims Britain as its province. With his follower's hearty agreement Arthur declines to submit himself to the Senate for judgement and instead takes the war to the enemy and invades the Empire. Only Mordred's treachery saves Rome from total defeat.

Geoffrey was moved to write his fraudulent history, William tells us, either from an inordinate love of lying or from a desire to please his stupid countrymen. This is not true, and William knew it. Geoffrey did not initiate the historical controversy in which he engaged so effectively, he wrote in response to men of William's ilk, monk historians dedicated to advancing the cause of the Papal Reformation. His history defended the reputation of the Britons from the attacks of a powerful enemy which was not itself above misrepresenting the historical facts.

The papacy in this period claimed to be not only the highest spiritual authority but also the highest secular authority in Christendom, with the power to select, and deselect, the lay rulers of every region in the Latin west. The pope alone was the heir of Constantine, the feudal lord of every other prince from the emperor down. The claim was made on the basis of the Donation of Constantine - a forged document. This fabrication is supposed to have fooled the entire western world up to the Renaissance. But is it likely the papacy was fooled by its own creation?

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<sup>178</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, I.18 p74; I.2, p54

Closer to home, when the Anglo-Norman historians condemned the Irish and the Welsh as barbarians they had before them Bede's *History of the English Church and People*. It was indeed their most treasured and respected source, as William testifies. And it is from Bede we learn that in Ireland a little before his time "there were many English nobles and lesser folk ... The Scots welcomed them all kindly and, without asking for any payment, provided them with daily food, books, and instruction".<sup>179</sup> So the monk historians knew that the 'beastlike' Irish had, centuries before, not only evangelised the English but also provided them with a free education system, including a maintenance grant. And in the opening years of the seventh century, Bede tells us, the British contingent which met with Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, included "seven British bishops and many very learned men".<sup>180</sup>

Geoffrey of Monmouth and William of Newburgh were not engaged in an academic dispute. The redefinition of the Celts as barbarians was not a deduction from the evidence, it was political propaganda designed to justify a war of conquest against fellow Christians. If the Irish and the British were outside the bounds of Latin Christendom then their countries were empty lands, available for expropriation and colonisation. In reply to this black propaganda, Geoffrey presented the Latin speaking world with a complete written history of his people, derived from an earlier written history, he claimed. If this claim was a lie the circumstances surely should excuse the deception. But actually, it wasn't.

### **Geoffrey's Deception**

Geoffrey claims in his preface that the origin of his history was British book presented to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford. He has merely transcribed that book into Latin, in his own rustic style. Nobody now believes him.

Geoffrey had his sources. He clearly had British sources which have not come down to us, but the principal sources he used are extant: Gildas, Bede and Nennius. These texts were known to all literate men of his day, and Geoffrey does address his history to the literate, specifically to his readers. The use he makes of these standard texts is so obvious - parts of Gildas are copied almost word for word - that no one who had read them could have been unaware that they were his sources, even if he did not himself repeatedly draw attention to the fact. In addition he quotes from Juvenal, Lucan and Apuleius, made use of Vergil, Livy and Orosius, and has Hoel king of Brittany praise a speech of Arthur's for its "Ciceronian eloquence" - which speech of course Geoffrey wrote himself. In short **the history is intended to display Geoffrey's vast erudition and his accomplished penmanship. The rustic style was never meant to be taken seriously - and nor was the British book.**

Those scholars who actually study Geoffrey's work have been aware of this for at least a century. R H Fletcher in 1906 illustrated this point with the example of Corineus, the first king of Cornwall and the friend and ally of King Brutus. Corineus himself freed the land of Cornwall from the giants who then infested it, defeating the last of them in a wrestling match. Geoffrey particularises the number of ribs Corineus

<sup>179</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III, 27

<sup>180</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II, 2

broke on that far-off occasion; three in all, two on the right side and one on the left! We can hardly be expected to read this without a smile. Fletcher suggested that both this joke, and Geoffrey's claim of an ancient British book, were "intended to satirise other books which laid ridiculous claim to ancient sources".<sup>181</sup>

Geoffrey was no lying cleric out to fool an ignorant laity. By 1950 J S P Tatlock, still a prime authority on Geoffrey, was suggesting that his history was itself evidence that "even in his day the best minds of the laity were not unduly credulous."<sup>182</sup> It was to the laity that Geoffrey's history was addressed, to readers who "had had their fill of books by churchmen which exalted the Church."<sup>183</sup> His was a different type of history, one which, in contrast to most histories of the period, was decidedly un-monkish.

Valerie Flint takes the argument still further. She points out that while Geoffrey's British book may never have existed its donor, Archdeacon Walter, certainly did. He was provost of the college of secular canons of St. Georges in Oxford where Geoffrey too was most probably a member. And St. Georges was at the forefront of the resistance to the 'aggressive monasticism' of the Reformers which sought to impose celibacy on the entire priesthood and to drive married clergy either out of their marriages or out of their livelihood. Archdeacon Walter, it seems, was a married man.

In Valerie Flint's view, Geoffrey's was indeed an alternative type of history. He wrote in defence of the secular values then under attack from the Reforming Church. His heroes were "not celibates and monks but kings and queens with heirs to care for, a country to love, and the courage and imagination to provide for them."<sup>184</sup> It was intended to be enjoyed as literature, but it was also an attack on contemporary historical writing and on three historians in particular whom Geoffrey addresses at the end of his book. His history ends with the last British king of all Britain, Cadwallader, who died in Rome. The subsequent history of the island, Geoffrey announces, he leaves to other historians: The task of describing the Welsh kings to his contemporary Caradoc of Llancarfan, the kings of the Saxons to William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon. But these last two should say nothing about the kings of the Britons, as they do not have the book in the British tongue which Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford put in his possession.

Caradoc of Llancarfan was a writer of Welsh Saints Lives, monkish stories in which kings and princes, including the Tyrant Arthur, appear as villains, foils to the hero-saints who defeat and humiliate them. A history of the Welsh kings is exactly the sort of work this man would not be engaged in. Geoffrey's invitation to him is no complement, it is an insult. As for Henry and William, both men wrote English histories, both with a preface emphasising the quality and breadth of their reading. Henry, in the same preface which made the claim that it was history which distinguished rational men from brute beasts, also praised his own abilities as a writer. Geoffrey in his preface claims just one British book as the source of his history, which he has merely translated in his own rustic style - and then forbids William and

<sup>181</sup> Robert Huntington Fletcher, *The Arthurian material in the Chronicles*, p56

<sup>182</sup> J S P Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1950, p277

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Valerie I J Flint, *Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose*, p 467-8



Henry, for the lack of it, from touching on the subject he has made his own.

Among the sources which Geoffrey actually uses are the histories of William and Henry themselves. But, says Flint, Geoffrey uses them only to mock them in a “subtle but quite relentless substitution of images”.<sup>185</sup> William attributes the construction of the hot baths at Bath to the plainly historical Julius Caesar. Geoffrey says they were built by the patently fictional Bladud, who met his death in a flying accident. Henry’s Emperor Constantine is the son of St. Helen, grandson of the British king Coel (the original Old King Cole). Geoffrey’s Coel is a duke who usurped the kingdom, his Helen, though beautiful, musical and learned, is no saint, and his Constantine dedicates himself, not to building churches and suppressing heresy, but to promoting his British relations. The English law codes, treasured by the monastic historians, particularly for their protection of sanctuary rights, originate, according to Geoffrey, with the British rulers King Dunvallo and Queen Marcia. The insult is driven home by the reference to Gildas, who, Geoffrey says, translated these Molmutine laws into Latin: Geoffrey’s educated contemporaries would know Gildas did no such thing.

Did William of Newburgh really not know what Geoffrey was up to? We have evidence, as Flint points out, that William of Malmesbury certainly did. His *De Antiquitate Glastoniense Ecclesiae* contains an account of the conversion of Britain to Christianity: at the request of King Lucius of Britain, Pope Eleutherius sent two missionaries, Phaganus and Deruvianus, who converted the Britons from paganism and built the first church at Glastonbury. The story is from Bede, but Bede, though he names the pope who sent them, the British king who received them, even the Roman Emperors who ruled conjointly at the time, does not name the missionaries. Geoffrey (who excludes any mention of William’s beloved Glastonbury from his entire history) gives the same names as William, but he also gives his source: the names and deeds not only of these two but of the great many religious men who assisted them in their godly work can be found in a book Gildas wrote about the victories of Aurelius Ambrosius. There was no such book. William took the point. In his revised form of his *Gesta Regum*, which incorporates material from *De Antiquitate*, he not only omits the missionaries’ names but states explicitly that they have been forgotten.

Geoffrey did not read all about the first Christian mission in a book written by Gildas. Nor did he produce his own history by translating a book given him by Walter of Oxford.

**This isn’t fraud, it’s satire. But it is satire with a very serious purpose.**

### **Geoffrey on Gildas**

The essence of Geoffrey’s fraud, as William of Newburgh saw it and as the Dark Age historians see it today, is that he persuaded his readers to treat the legendary British king as if he were a genuine historical character. But the Dark Age historians fail to see the political implications which would have been absolutely apparent to William. The British historical tradition, of which Arthur was the linchpin, portrayed the British peoples as the rightful rulers of the island of Britain at a time when the Roman Church, particularly the faction William belonged to, was striving to subjugate the

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<sup>185</sup> Valerie I J Flint, *Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose*, p456

remaining independent Britons to the dominion of the Anglo-Normans. The Welsh princes were to be placed under the dominion of the English crown, if indeed they were not to be ousted altogether. The Welsh Church was to be absorbed into the English Church, under the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Welsh resisted. Their historical tradition denied the justice of Rome's cause. It was they, and not the English, who were the rightful rulers of Britain. In winning the crown of England the Normans had not won the right to rule Wales. Though their cause might at times appear hopeless the Welsh still hoped for deliverance. They hoped for Arthur's return.

When William of Newburgh denounced the British faith in Arthur he did not do so as a rationalist ridiculing a childish superstition. He did not dispute the validity of prophecy. He simply denied this one. His disproof included the observation that Merlin, by Geoffrey's admission, was fathered by a devil, and "devils, being excluded from the light of God, can never by meditation arrive at the cognisance of future events."<sup>186</sup>

The British belief in the historical Arthur was bound up with their belief in his return, in their hope of a restoration. And a history which included Arthur inevitably portrayed the British as a Christian folk who had lost their lands through pagan treachery. The history of the English, of which Bede was the founding text, portrayed the English as the rightful rulers of Britain. God had given the best lands to them. The original inhabitants had been deposed by God's will, in punishment for their wickedness. Bede's evidence for this view is Gildas - as William of Newburgh reminds us.

According to William, the historical Arthur and the whole glorious history of the Britons presented in Geoffrey's book is a lie. Geoffrey had no British book, and the Britons had no glorious history. We have the truth from Bede, who describes how easily the Britons were subdued by the Saxons. They were easily subdued because they were a contemptible race, militarily and morally, for which fact we have the evidence of Gildas, a British historian on whom Bede drew. Though Gildas' Latin is coarse and unpolished his testimony is absolutely trustworthy: "there can be no suspicion that the truth is disguised, when a Briton, speaking of Britons, declares, that they were neither courageous in war, nor faithful in peace."<sup>187</sup>

So the *bruti* British did have a historian, but just the one. As William of Malmesbury remarked, before Geoffrey wrote: "What notice the Britons had attracted from other peoples they owed to Gildas",<sup>188</sup> in which case, as historians have observed, they can have known little good of them. William of Newburgh claimed that Geoffrey's history was an attempt to wash out the stains in the British character, and those stains were put there by Gildas. Valerie Flint demonstrates that Geoffrey's history is an attack on the monk historians of his own day, and on their treasured sources. Above all it is an attack on Gildas.

The attack begins at the beginning, in the opening paragraph of the dedication, where Geoffrey draws his readers' attention to the 'brilliant books' which Bede and

<sup>186</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, preface

<sup>187</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, preface

<sup>188</sup> in *De Gestis Regum* - see John Gillingham, *The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain*, p105

Gildas made. Thereafter, in the body of the book, he refers the reader five times to Gildas, for corroboration or further information on topics briefly touched on - and always with praise so extravagant and so inappropriate no one who has read Gildas' sermon could mistake Geoffrey's purpose. All but one of the references are to incidents Gildas never touched on.

Only the last reference is genuine Gildas. Geoffrey is close to the end of his story. Cadwallo, father of the last British king of Britain, has himself been driven from his throne by the English King Edwin. The exile has come to his kinsman, Salomon, King of Brittany, requesting aid. This drama entails a speech from both men, analysing the cause of Britain's problems. Cadwallo's speech includes a paraphrase of a passage from Gildas, the part where the Britons basked in luxury and fell prey to every vice, including "such fornication as is not known even among the Gentiles", "welcoming Satan as an angel of light" and slaying kings soon after their anointing "with no enquiry into the truth" in order to elevate still crueller replacements. The paraphrase is so close that no one who had read both texts could fail to observe it, even if we were not directed to it by Cadwallo's remark "as the historian Gildas tells us". He concludes his speech with the statement that it is no wonder God has punished the Britons by allowing invaders to take their land.

This is exactly the English perspective on British history, the story found in Bede who, of course, had it from Gildas. It is the version of history which the Anglo-Norman Reformers, heirs to the English Church, to her rights, her incomes and her lands, were busily engaged in promoting. It is the precise antithesis of the British hope in Arthur. It rests on Gildas, alone. There is only one witness to the vile character and appalling acts of the Britons which merited the loss of their lands. To wash the stain from the character of his race, Geoffrey has only to demolish Gildas' reputation as a historian. It is for that purpose Geoffrey, with sarcastic praise, directs his readers to Gildas' text, to topics Gildas never covered.

The first reference to Gildas is immediately after the first conquest of Britain and the founding of her first city, Troia Nova, later Trinovantum. Geoffrey skips ahead in his narrative and relates how the name of the city was eventually changed to Kaerlud (which finally gives our London) by King Lud, the brother of King Cassivelaunus who fought Julius Caesar. A third brother, Nennius, was outraged that Lud would do away with the name of Troy in his own country, but Geoffrey limits his reportage of this incident: "since Gildas the historian has dealt with this quarrel at sufficient length, I prefer to omit it, for I do not wish to appear to be spoiling by my homelier style what so distinguished a writer has set out with so much eloquence."<sup>189</sup>

Gildas includes no such incident. Indeed he begins his history by stating that he intends to say nothing about the history of Britain before the coming of the Romans, beyond that the country was then sunk in paganism and ruled by tyrants. There is nothing in Gildas about the foundation of any British city, before or after the coming of the Romans. There is no mention of Lud, Nennius, or Cassivelaunus. There is no mention of Julius Caesar. In Gildas' history we are not told precisely which Romans

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<sup>189</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, I.18, p74

invaded Britain, or when. But we are told, specifically, that there was no British resistance: "The people, unwarlike but untrustworthy, were not subdued, like other races, by the sword fire and the engines of war so much as by mere threats and legal penalties". Gildas made this up. Geoffrey's readers have only to turn from Gildas to Bede, as he has effectively directed them to in his preface, and Gildas mendacity is exposed. For Bede tells us there was a British resistance and names Cassobellaunus as its leader - as indeed does Caesar himself in his Gallic wars. Geoffrey adds one more proof, quoting a line from Lucan on Caesar: "he ran away in terror from the Britons whom he had come to attack". In a few brief, humorous lines Geoffrey has shown us that Gildas had no intention of writing a history of Britain, as such, and that this British monk is the antithesis of a patriot.

The next two references are to works, aside from his sermon, which Gildas never wrote; the Latin translation of the Molmutine law code, and the book about the victories of Aurelius Ambrosius which gave an account of the first Christian mission to Britain. A very full account, according to Geoffrey, including the names and deeds of a great number of religious men who came over to assist Faganus and Duvianus in their work, which Geoffrey declines to repeat: "All this Gildas set out in a treatise which is so lucidly written that it seemed to me unnecessary that it should be described a second time in my more homely style."<sup>190</sup> Neither work existed. Gildas tells us nothing of how Britain was governed before the coming of the Romans, and all that he has to say about the victories of Ambrosius is contained in a single paragraph. His book is not a British history, nor a patriotic history, and nor is it a military history. Indeed, as Geoffrey goes on to demonstrate, it isn't even a religious history.

There is no King Lucius in Gildas' history. The story is taken from Bede. Geoffrey's educated readers would know this of course, but he carefully underlines it. Bede opens his story with a date reference: "In the year of our Lord's Incarnation 156..."<sup>191</sup> which Geoffrey recycles for the death of Lucius, "In the year 156 after the Incarnation of our Lord he was buried with all honour..." Gildas, in contrast, dates the first Christian mission to the time of the apostles, in the reign of Tiberius. We know that in Geoffrey's day the Lucius legend was the official version of Britain's conversion, the one promoted by the Reformers (the Joseph of Arimathea story was not incorporated into any ecclesiastical history until the following century). But if Bede is right then Gildas must be wrong. And if Gildas, a monk, could be wrong on this issue, what else might he be wrong about?

Geoffrey's fourth reference is to the mission of Germanus and Lupus which successfully combated the Pelagian heresy in Britain: "for through their agency God performed many wonders, which Gildas has described with great literary skill in his treatise."<sup>192</sup> Gildas, Geoffrey invites us to observe, describes nothing with great literary skill, and certainly not this. Neither the Pelagians, nor Germanus, get so much as a mention in his sermon. Bede has a full account of the two missions, taken from Constantius. He even gives a contemporary reference, quoting a poem from 'Prosper

<sup>190</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, IV.20, p125-6

<sup>191</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, I.4

<sup>192</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, VI.13, p160

the rhetorician'. This isn't a legend: the mission did really happen, and Geoffrey's readers knew it. It is exactly the sort of incident that a monk historian could be expected to report. Yet Gildas does not mention it.

Once Geoffrey has drawn his readers' attention to Gildas' omissions they could not fail to notice others. Most startling is the complete absence of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor who was not only raised to the purple in Britain but was, in Geoffrey's day, thought to be half British himself, the son of the British princess St. Helen. There is no mention of either of Constantine III whom Geoffrey makes Arthur's grandfather, but his readers would know from Bede that this man existed. There is no mention of Arthur - but there is no Arthur in Bede either.

In the very first paragraph of his work, in the dedication, Geoffrey draws his readers' attention to the classical problem of Arthur. Until Walter gave him that British book he was himself unable to find out anything about the kings of Britain, about Arthur, except what Gildas and Bede related in the brilliant books they each made on the subject. This is a frank invitation to his audience to turn to the brilliant books of Bede and Gildas and see what they have to say about the most famous British king. And what would they find? Badon, but no Arthur: the victor is not named in either text. But Geoffrey's readers would be bound to observe that there was nothing in Bede's text on this subject that he hadn't taken straight from Gildas. The evidence against Arthur is not Bede and Gildas, it is Gildas alone. Modern historians are of course aware of this, but any contemporary reader of Geoffrey, following his direction, would have reached the same conclusion.

There is no Arthur in Gildas' book. But *The Ruin of Britain* is not a patriotic history, nor a military history, nor, indeed, is it a history of Britain. It fails to give any account, or even to name the names, of other important individuals who played a major and widely recognised role in Britain's past. It doesn't even name the first Christian emperor. As Geoffrey so plainly demonstrates to his readers, Gildas is no historian, and his sermon is no kind of evidence against Arthur's existence.

For centuries Geoffrey has been accused of fooling his contemporaries into treating the British historical tradition as if it were genuine history. Perhaps they were fooled. But equally they might have been convinced by his arguments.

### **The Return of Arthur**

Arthur 'emerges' into European history in the twelfth century. He did not suddenly appear out of nowhere, he was translocated from the historical tradition of his own people into the Anglo-Norman historical tradition - that is, into the historical tradition of an alien and largely hostile race - and thence into Europe.

This is a startling phenomenon. In the early decades of the twelfth century British history, and its principal hero, were all but unknown to the rest of Europe. Yet before the end of that century a French commentator on Geoffrey's other major work, *The Prophecies of Merlin*, was famously to ask: "What place is there within the bounds of the empire of Christendom to which the winged praise of Arthur the Briton has not extended? Who is there, I ask, who does not speak of Arthur the Briton, since he is but

little less known to the peoples of Asia than to the Britons, as we are informed by our palmers who return from the countries of the East? The Eastern people speak of him as do the Western, though separated by the breadth of the whole earth. Egypt speaks of him and the Bosphorus is not silent. Rome, queen of cities, sings his deeds, and his wars are not unknown to her former rival Carthage. Antioch, Armenia, and Palestine celebrate his feats."<sup>193</sup> From the time of Geoffrey's writing to the end of his century the public reputation of the Britons had undergone a total transformation: Their national hero was now all Christendom's hero; the period of his rule, of British independence, a lost lamented Golden Age in the eyes of all Europe. How very odd this is historians don't appear to notice.

There has been some little debate about the processes involved. Was Geoffrey entirely responsible for the whole business, or only partly, his history encouraging the spread of the romances by passing Arthur off as an historical character? It is now commonly observed that *The History of the Kings of Britain* is great literature, even that it made a great contribution to European literature by providing it with the memorable characters of Arthur and Merlin. What commentators fail to note is that this was a propaganda victory of almost unimaginable proportions. The British nations, squeezed to the extreme margins of their territory and under pressing threat from more powerful neighbours, suddenly succeeded in foisting their version of history onto a Europe which was previously ignorant of it: this, in a world where winners write history! Whatever proportion of this success belongs to Geoffrey, this much we have to credit: **it was certainly a part of his purpose to persuade the non-Celtic races of Arthur's existence, and he achieved that spectacularly.**

And for his very success Geoffrey was condemned as a fraud for centuries. The extent of this misjudgement of Geoffrey is the most impressive illustration of the anti-Celtic bias of our modern historical tradition. Historians denouncing Geoffrey not only paid no attention to the sheer scale of his achievement, they entirely ignored the political circumstances in which it was achieved. It was achieved, as said, against a background of military aggression against the British from more powerful neighbours, an aggression encouraged and abetted by the most powerful political force in Europe, the Roman Church. It is on record that Roman clerics denigrated Arthur and denounced Arthurian romance. Geoffrey himself was not merely denounced, he was demonised.<sup>194</sup> And it is all the stranger that historians have ignored the political background to Geoffrey's achievement considering his history is dedicated to two of the greatest Norman power-brokers of his day, whose shifts of allegiance determined which dynasty finally held the English crown.

It should always have been obvious that there was more to Arthur's return to history than the appeal of his legend, or the stupidity of Geoffrey's readers. But exactly what lay behind it all, the Dark Age historians have not thought to ask. It is not, after all, their area. Arthur enters the historical domain in the twelfth century, and is a subject for the medieval specialist. And what the medieval specialists have discovered about

<sup>193</sup> These words are sometimes attributed to Alain de Lille, sometimes to Alan of Tewkesbury.

<sup>194</sup> by Giraldus Cambrensis in *Itinerary through Wales* - see above, Chapter 1.2, *The Pseudo-History of Britain*

Geoffrey has not penetrated through to the Dark Age historians, who continue to view him as the enlightenment viewed him, as a fraudulent historian, and as a stick with which to beat the Arthurians.

How right, as it turns out, is Oliver Padel's observation: asking the wrong question can thoroughly distort our interpretation of the evidence. This long misjudgement of Geoffrey of Monmouth rests on just one question, centuries old: Did he, as he claimed, have a British book, of which his *History of the Kings of Britain* is a translation? The answer was clearly 'No'. So Geoffrey was dismissed as a fraud, and even now no respectable Dark Age historian can risk appearing to endorse anything he included in his disreputable book.

The same devastating distortion can arise from failing to ask the right question. The entire history of sub-Roman Britain is now supposed to rest on one text, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*. But why is Gildas our only surviving contemporary text? This is surely the 'natural' question, the one above all others which it ought to have occurred to Dark Age historians to ask. They don't ask it. However, one of them has already supplied us with the answer. In *Sub-Roman Britain* David Dumville tells us that "In Southern England in the late seventh, the eighth and ninth centuries, and particularly at Canterbury, a great deal of scholarly activity centred on the text of Gildas..."<sup>195</sup> Canterbury, in the extreme south east of Britain, in the territory earliest lost to the invader, was the seat of the first bishop of the English. The only surviving British document from Arthur's period was preserved by their racial enemies. It was Saxon scholars who handed Gildas' history down to posterity.

The history of the defeated is indeed forfeit. What has survived of the British tradition has now been ruled out as irrelevant to the study of Arthur's period: it is all far too late; it is untrustworthy; it isn't history at all, it is only legend. The fifth- and sixth-century British, as Dumville reminds us in a tone of weary contempt, have failed to hand down to us anything historians could respect as an historical source. But this is hardly an honest appraisal.

If we want to understand Dark Age Britain, if we really want to know what happened in this formative period of our history, we cannot simply rule the British tradition out of court. The British were the dominant force throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. It is pointless for the Dark Age historians to complain that the record they have left us is not the record they feel entitled to expect. The Britons were defeated. This is the best they could manage. It may be that it is mostly legendary. Then we must address our questions to the legend.

Heretic Emperor: The Lost History of King Arthur  
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<sup>195</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p183-4

# Heretic Emperor

The Lost History of King Arthur

V M Pickin

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## BOOK 2

### THE LEGEND

*There is a stream of tradition, running as it were underground, which from time to time rises to the surface, only to be relentlessly suppressed. It may be the Troubadours, the symbolical language of whose love poems is held to convey another, less innocent meaning, or the Albigenses, whose destruction the church holds for a sacred duty. Alchemy, whose Elixir of Life and Philosopher's Stone are but names veiling a deeper and more spiritual meaning, belong to the same family. Of similar origin is that freemasonry which outside our own Islands is even today reckoned as the greatest enemy of the Christian faith, and which still employs signs and symbols identical with those known and used in the mysteries of long-vanished faiths.*

*Jessie Weston, The Quest for the Holy Grail, 1913*

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## Chapter 5

### The Grail Mystery

*We cannot accept a text, or an item in a text, simply on the ground that it appears to derive from 'tradition'. This all too common excuse is by itself meaningless. What is 'tradition'? Whose tradition? Monastic, legal, or craft tradition?*

*David Dumville, 1977.<sup>1</sup>*

#### **The Hidden Church**

The problem with Arthur is the legend, which completely overshadows the history. Arthur is remembered because of the legend, and remembered as the legend presents him, a Golden Age king. The historical evidence was always acknowledged to be slight. It is now dismissed as non-existent. Where once evidence for the historical Arthur was to be sought in the pre-Geoffrey British texts, now the entire Arthurian matter, British or European, before or after Geoffrey, is counted as legendary. And being legend it is historically irrelevant.

'Alternative' historians take an opposite view. The apparently least historical, most fairy-tale element of the Arthurian legend, the legend of the Holy Grail, has proved for them a most fruitful source of material. Most readers of this book will be familiar the genre. First in the field in recent years was Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln's *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, published in 1982. Many have since followed the same trail. The basic premise these works share is that the Grail is a metaphor used to conceal a forbidden history in the form of a story.

The Grail story begins in Palestine, with the crucifixion of Christ. The Gospels tell us that Joseph of Arimathea, up till then a secret follower of Christ, begged his body from Pilate and interred it in his own grave. In the Grail story he also came into possession of the vessel of the Last Supper, in which he caught the blood of Christ as he hung on the cross. This sacred relic was then removed from Palestine - to Britain, in some versions - and guarded at a secret location. The principal Grail stories tell of the hero's quest for this wonderful vessel and the beatitude he achieves by finding it.

Alternative history holds that what is actually being referred to is an ancient form of Christianity, condemned as heretical by Rome, flourishing in the Dark Ages and surviving into the medieval period as a secret cult, frequently in the hands of a particular family of exalted, but persecuted, lineage - the offspring of a union between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. The Grail legend was created as a form of covert propaganda for this cult or lineage, a weapon in its centuries-long conflict with the Roman Church, in which struggle the Templars, the Celtic Church, and sometimes Arthur himself, are held to have played a role.

Every element of this alternative theory of the Grail is now well outside the academic mainstream. But that wasn't always the case.

<sup>1</sup> *Sub-Roman Britain*, p192

### **From Ritual to Romance**

The connection between the Grail and Christian heresy was most convincingly advanced by Jessie Weston in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Born in 1850, Weston was not a professional academic, for in her period that option was not open to women. But unlike many of the recent works on the subject, her argument, put forward in *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and *From Ritual to Romance*, is couched in an impeccably academic style. Initially it received widespread academic acceptance.

When Weston wrote there were two main theories of the Grail: one held it to be a Christian ecclesiastical legend, the other a story rooted in Celtic folklore that was only later overlaid with Christian symbolism. Weston put forward a third option: the Grail was both pagan and Christian. The Grail story was pagan in origin, but deliberately Christianised. Though Christian in its medieval form, it did not originate within the Church which at first treated it with pronounced hostility. And it was never entirely absorbed. A commentator in the thirteenth century remarks that the Grail history is all lies, and the Church knows nothing of it. No relic approximating to the Grail was ever presented for public veneration. Even Glastonbury Abbey, which in time claimed Joseph of Arimathea as its founder, never dared lay claim to the Grail, for all the revenue that might have brought in. And the Grail romances were all composed during the period when the Cathar heresy flourished in the Languedoc, in south-west France. In Weston's view this temporal coincidence of heresy and story betrays a deeper connection.

Weston's argument is indebted to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, that vast study of the magical beliefs and superstitions of 'savage' peoples and their relation to the religions of the civilized races - Darwinian evolution applied to the development of religion. Frazer demonstrated a continuity between the religious thought of the ancient world and nineteenth-century peasant rituals celebrating the death and resurrection of a spirit of the vegetation. From these researches Frazer reached the conclusion that kingship, in the remote past, was a religious function. Kings were originally magicians, responsible for the fertility of the crops and the well-being of the people. In order to fulfil their role they had to be perfect, not only morally but physically. For this reason the king was periodically sacrificed and replaced by a younger man - he could not be allowed to grow old. The peasant ritual was a remembrance of an actual human sacrifice.

The connections between the pagan beliefs Frazer outlines and the Grail legend are immediately obvious. In most versions of the Quest, the keeper of the Grail castle, the Fisher King, is wounded - in the foot, thighs, or more frankly, in the genitals. His country is a Waste Land, magically restored to fertility when the Quest is achieved. In some cases at the achievement of the Quest he is finally allowed to die, his place being taken by the young hero. Surviving versions of the tale, Weston deduced, are garbled. In most medieval versions it is the hero's initial failure to achieve the Quest, usually through not asking the critical question when the Grail passes him in procession, which brings disaster on the land. Weston argued that originally the land was laid waste by the wounding of the Fisher King. The original object of the Quest

was to attain to kingship; the hero had to prove himself worthy of the role, and capable of assuming its duties. The healing of the land depending on the king's restoration to health, or, as Frazer demonstrated, the elevation of a suitable healthy youth to the throne. But where Weston differs from Frazer is that to her, this 'fertility cult' is no primitive superstition.

Behind the public fertility rites, she argues, and employing the same symbolism, were the mystery cults of the ancient world, open only to initiates. These were concerned not with fertility, but immortality - as the god died and rose again, so would the initiate. The greatest minds of the ancient world spoke respectfully of these mysteries; Neoplatonic philosophy utilised their imagery; they had a profound influence on the development of early Christianity, particularly on Gnosticism. A Gnostic is one who knows; that is, an initiate.

The Christian Gnostic groups had none of the intolerance and exclusivity which characterised orthodox Christianity. Their faith was syncretic. They recognised a kinship between their own beliefs and those of the earlier mystery traditions, and saw nothing wrong in utilising their texts for elucidation. They may even have taken part in their rituals; Hippolytus, in his *Refutation of All Heresies*, accuses them of precisely that. As evidence of this syncretic tendency Weston cites the Naassene text which Hippolytus' attack has preserved for us. This work, in the analysis of G R S Mead, was composed of three successive layers, an original pagan document worked over by a Jewish mystic and subsequently by a Christian Gnostic. Its theme is the essential one-ness of the mystery traditions of all the nations.

Weston wrote before the discoveries at Qumran and Nag Hammadi, when practically all knowledge of Gnostic belief and its origins was derived from the writings of its opponents, the orthodox Church fathers. In her period the belief was that Gnosticism had arisen as elements within the early Church came under the influence of the surrounding pagan mystery-cults, modifying their original doctrine and practices. The written record now available to us shows that Gnosticism did not infiltrate the early Church, it was present at the outset. But current understanding of the origins of Christian Gnosticism only lends further support to Weston's hypothesis. Christian Gnosticism was, as she argues, always syncretic, viewing the pagan mysteries not as rivals, but as precursors: The Nag Hammadi library contains Christian, Jewish and pagan religious texts.

The Grail story is just such a syncretic union of Christian belief and pagan mysteries and is not, in Weston's view, a purely literary phenomenon. It is the description of a ritual then still being performed. Weston relates that among her acquaintance were those who knew of the continued existence of just such a ritual, who declared the Grail legend was the story of an initiation. Behind the story there was an initiatory cult, a Christian mystery religion which made its way into Britain at some point in the Roman period. Here, recognising in the native paganism, that is Druidism, a reflection of its own doctrines, it went native. After the triumph of orthodoxy this syncretic Druidical/Christian cult perpetuated itself in secret, in the mountains of Wales. As evidence for this possibility Weston points out that Pliny comments on the

similarity between Magian and Druidical Gnosis, and that the cult of Mithra was still practised in the Alps and Vosges in the fifth century, when Christianity was the only officially permitted religion.

In the twelfth century this British pagano-Christian cult came out into the open and crossed the channel. Weston holds that the name of its carrier has come down to us: Bledri.<sup>2</sup> Three separate French romances refer to a storyteller of this name<sup>3</sup> “of Welsh birth and origin” who knew “all the feats, and all the tales, of all the kings, and all the counts who had lived in Britain” and who warned against revealing the secrets of the Grail. The Norman-Welsh cleric, Giraldus Cambrensis, writing at the end of the twelfth century, mentions “that famous storyteller Bledhericus, who lived a little before our time”<sup>4</sup> as someone well known to his contemporaries. In Weston’s view this man was no mere teller of tales, but an initiate, a Welsh Gnostic Christian who knew the significance of the story he told. And he brought it into a Europe ready to receive such teachings.

The composition of the Grail stories coincides exactly with the resurrection of Gnostic Christianity in western Europe. In the twelfth century the last Gnostic Church in the west established itself in the Languedoc. It is known to history as the Cathar or Albigensian heresy. The word Cathar comes from the Greek *katharos*, meaning unpolluted, an alternative to the term *perfecti*, or Parfaits, by which the spiritual elite were generally known. Albigensian is derived from the town of Albi. Their opponents also referred to the heretics as Manichaeans and as Arians. They consciously formed a Christian Church quite separate from that of Rome, whose teachings they regarded as a perversion of Christ’s message. Roma, they pointed out, was the inverse of Love, Amor.

For the Cathars, as for most Gnostics, the God of the Old Testament, the ruler of this world, was actually the Devil. Souls were entrapped in this world of matter by his wiles and stratagem. They believed in reincarnation, and salvation for them, as for Hindus and Buddhists, meant escape from the continual cycle of rebirth into this fallen world. Their congregation was made up of *credentes*, believers, those who had not yet received the Consolamentum and might not do so until their deaths or until a more fortunate reincarnation, and the Parfaits who were already saved, having renounced this world and received the holy spirit in the Consolamentum - the only Cathar sacrament. The Parfaits, the priesthood of the Cathars which included both men and women, were strict ascetics who abstained not only from sexual intercourse but from all foods produced by the sexual act, restricting themselves to a vegan diet. This Church had its own organisational and teaching structure, its own bishops, and it was in communication with other Gnostic Christian communities. It is on record that in

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<sup>2</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, chapter 14, *The Author*. See also E K Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, p149-50

<sup>3</sup> Thomas’ *Tristan*, c1160-70, calls him Bréri; the *First Continuation*, appended to Chrétien de Troyes unfinished *Perceval*, but by another writer, has Bleheris; and in the *Elucidation*, likewise attached to Chrétien’s story, which it does nothing to elucidate, he appears as Master Blihos.

<sup>4</sup> *Description of Wales*, Book 1, chapter 17

1167 the Bogomil<sup>5</sup> bishop Nicetas arrived in the Languedoc from Constantinople and called a synod of Cathar bishops and ministers at Saint-Felix de Caraman, near Toulouse.

It was shortly before this, in 1163, that the Council of Tours denounced the 'new heresy', though St. Bernard was apparently preaching against it in 1145. Preaching proved ineffective. Traditionally the Church relied on the 'secular arm' for the forcible suppression of heresy. Her problem in the Languedoc was that the nobility were Cathar sympathisers almost to a man (and woman - many noblewomen became famous *perfectae*). The only solution in such a pass was the replacement of the entire ruling class. In 1208 Pope Innocent III proclaimed the Albigensian Crusade, offering the usual crusader dispensations to all who would take the cross against an enemy 'worse than the very Saracens'. It was an attractive proposition to land-hungry northern warriors, being a lot less dangerous than the Palestine venture while offering ample scope for plunder and possibly more long-term gain. Simon de Montfort, the first leader of the crusade, came within a hair's breath of replacing Raymond VI as Count of Toulouse. (It was his son, with Papal encouragement, who almost unseated England's King John.)

After decades of war the crusade was finally victorious. The heresy's military defenders were crushed in the field of battle, and the Languedoc absorbed under the crown of France. But Rome was not confident that the job was complete. Having reduced the most cultivated land in Europe to a smoking ruin, she founded the Inquisition, a thought police of black-robed Dominicans, to pick among the wreckage for any trace of clandestine propagation of the heresy.

Weston argued that her theory of the Grail offered an explanation for elements that neither the Christian legend theory nor the Celtic folklore theory could address. It would explain why the Church knows nothing of the Grail; why it treated the apparently pious legend with such hostility; why the creation of Grail romances coincided so exactly with the public propagation of Gnostic Christianity in Europe and why, after the Albigensian crusade crushed the Cathar Church, no more Grail romances were composed - though the copying and eventually, printing of extant tales demonstrates they would not have lacked for an audience. "The Church of the eleventh and twelfth centuries knew well what the Grail was, and we, when we realise its genesis and true lineage, need no longer wonder why a theme, for some short space so famous and so fruitful a source of literary inspiration, vanished utterly and completely from the world of literature."<sup>6</sup>

### **The Cup of Sovereignty**

Weston's theory was at one time accepted by the most influential scholar of Arthurian legend in the twentieth century, R S Loomis. But in the end he decided it couldn't be so. The Grail legends could not have been produced by heretical cults, or as

<sup>5</sup> This Gnostic group originated in Armenia, where they were known as Paulicians. Forcibly transported to the Balkans, in their new home they became known as Bogomils, perhaps after a founder named Bogomil, 'beloved of God', but then again, perhaps not.

<sup>6</sup> Jessie L Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p188

propaganda against the Papacy. They were an integral part of the Matter of Britain: "There can be no doubt that the French men of letters who told of these astonishing adventures regarded them as inseparably connected in time and place with Arthur's reign and Arthur's realm."<sup>7</sup> The origin of the Grail stories is to be found in Celtic storytelling, and not in heresy: "In their earliest stages, when still following the patterns of Irish and Welsh myth and hero tales they dimly reflected the ideas and superstitions of a lingering paganism."<sup>8</sup>

It is Loomis theory which is now the consensus view. The Grail tales were originally Celtic, and pagan. The nearest extant parallel Loomis traced to the Irish *The Phantom's Frenzy*. The story concerns the High King Conn of the Hundred Battles, and how his title to the kingship was confirmed by otherworld agency. Conn, magically transported from Tara to the otherworld, enters a wonderful dwelling where he sees the 'phantom', the god Lug enthroned in glory, and beautiful maiden seated before cauldron of red liquor. She is the Sovereignty of Ireland. In her hand she holds a golden cup, which she fills repeatedly from the cauldron, each time asking Lug, "To whom shall this cup be given", a close parallel to the question Perceval should have asked, "Who is served from the Grail". Lug replies first with Conn's name, then with each of his royal successors, this prophecy being the 'frenzy' of the title.

It was not Ireland, however, but Wales that provided the immediate progenitor of the continental Grail stories. The proof is in the numerous parallels between the Fisher King and the Welsh deity Bran. Both are wounded - in the foot, thigh, or genitals. Both presided over a sumptuous banquet. Bran's story, like many of the Grail tales, prominently features a severed head. In some versions of the Grail legend the Fisher King is actually named Bron. Loomis postulates a lost Welsh original in which Bran took the place of Lug as Lord of the Castle of Sovereignty, where the prototype of the Grail Maiden served the candidate for kingship from her magical vessel.

The Christianisation of this pagan myth came about as it was transported from Britain to the Continent. It was, in Loomis view, the result of a mistranslation. The Welsh Bran had an epithet, Bendigeid, the Blessed, and Bran the Blessed owned a magical horn. As the tale was translated from Welsh to French confusion arose due to the similarity between the Welsh word for horn, *corn*, and the French for body, *cors*. The horn of Bran became a body in the possession of the Fisher King, and as the king was blessed, so the body in his possession must also be holy. In some versions of the tale the Grail contains a single mass wafer, the Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ. But who was it that originally possessed the actual Body of Christ? Joseph of Arimathea! Already well known in Christian apocrypha, in the Middle Ages Joseph was woven into the Grail Romances. Robert de Boron, creator of the earliest extant Grail origin legend, has Joseph give the precious vessel to Bron, his brother-in-law. It is ultimately carried into the far west, to the Vales of Avaron. The British deity receives his magic vessel back from the Biblical character. A linguistic error made the Grail Christian, and Joseph of Arimathea an evangelist.

The Celtic origin of the Grail is now almost universally acknowledged. Though no

<sup>7</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p7

<sup>8</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p276



exact Celtic original for the story has been discovered, there can be little doubt that behind the continental Grail stories lies a Celtic myth nexus concerned with Sovereignty. The closest Welsh parallel to the story of Conn is the dream of Maccsen Wledig. Maccsen, Emperor of Rome, dreams of a golden-roofed castle in which a beautiful girl is seated on a golden throne, with whom he instantly falls in love. After a long quest the castle is discovered just as Maccsen dreamt it, with the maiden herself, and her father carving chessmen, and her two brothers playing chess. The maiden Elen is the Sovereignty of Britain. Maccsen, who marries her, is the British usurper Magnus Maximus. He is to the medieval British what Conn is to the Irish, the source and symbol of legitimate kingship. The Celtic myth associated Sovereignty with a ritual board game, called *gwyddbwyll* in Welsh and in Irish *fidchell*.<sup>9</sup> A magic *gwyddbwyll* board was one of the Thirteen Treasures of Britain, the Welsh triads name its owner as Gwenddolau, princely patron of the prophet Merlin. The game of *fidchell*, in Irish legend, was invented by the god Lug himself. Magical chess games feature in many of the continental romances.

The maiden Sovereignty can appear in more than one form. In the Irish tale *The Sons of Daire* we meet her first as a hideous hag. She challenges the hero and his brothers to sleep the night with her: Only he agrees to do so, for he is the destined king. So soon as they lie down together she transmutes into her beautiful form, declaring her true nature to the boy:

I say unto thee, O mild youth  
With me the arch-kings cohabit  
I am the majestic, slender damsel  
The Sovereignty of Alba and Eire<sup>10</sup>

Variants of this tale made their way into English storytelling, two examples being Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale and the folk song *King Henry*. The Hideous Hag form of Sovereignty lies behind the Loathly Damsel of the continental Grail story.

The Grail, as Loomis says, is always associated with Arthur's reign and Arthur's realm. There are hints in some of the continental stories of lost tales in which Arthur himself, the rightful King of Britain, achieved the quest. But the usual heroes are Perceval and Gawain. Perceval, who in the earliest extant version is called 'the Welshman', is kinsman and rightful heir of the Fisher King. Gawain stands in the same relationship to Arthur, being his nephew, his sister's son.

But though the Grail story is evidently Celtic in origin that is not to say Loomis has disproved Weston's hypothesis. It is Loomis' contention that in tracing the continental Grail to the Celtic world, where all Arthurian legend originates, he has ruled out any possibility of its being propaganda directed against the Papacy. But actually the entire Matter of Britain was directed against the Papacy.

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<sup>9</sup> see Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Quest for Merlin*

<sup>10</sup> Caitlin Matthews, *Arthur and the Sovereignty of Britain*, p149-50

## **The Sacrament of Marriage**

No literature is written in a vacuum. To understand the Grail legend we have to take into account the society within which these stories were produced and promulgated. The spread of the Grail legend through continental Europe did indeed coincide with an upsurge in heresy. And as the French historian Georges Duby demonstrates,<sup>11</sup> a principal cause of this growth in heresy was the Papal Reformation, in particular the Reformers' teachings on sex and marriage.

In the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Reformers created the sacrament of marriage. Of course Christian marriage had always existed, indeed Christ himself pronounced on the subject of its indissolubility, but it was only at this late date that it was actually turned into a sacrament. The idea of sacralising marriage might seem to imply the elevation of relations between sexes, but the effect, in practice and intent, was quite the reverse. It promoted the first bout of heretic burning, at Orleans in 1002. The Orleans clerics, rigorous purists, believed in an absolute division between matter and spirit. In their interpretation this meant that, as marriage was inevitably carnal, it was and must remain a purely civil contract; to make a sacrament of it was sacrilegious. The Church's attack on the heretics portrayed them as feminists - the heretics did accept celibate females as equal to male, for both had transcended the flesh, and gender did not apply to the spirit. The official story was that the heresy had been brought to Orleans by a woman - the influence of women, in the view of the Reformers, was always pernicious.

The Reformers were equally severe on their accidental opponents. Their claim to superiority over all lay authority rested on the fact that the clergy were spiritually superior, as uncontaminated by contact with the world of the flesh, i.e. with women. But this was an ideal bred in the monasteries. In point of fact the clergy as a whole were not celibates, in many areas marriage was the norm - Geoffrey of Monmouth and his Oxford colleagues had tradition on their side. But the Reformers were determined to end this pernicious abuse: married clergy were to be suddenly deprived of their families, the unfortunate wives and children were to be turned out of house and home. It is even said that some wives were sold into slavery, and the rulings of the Council of Bourges certainly add credence to the possibility. Bourges excluded the sons of priests from religious orders, forbade any to give a woman in marriage to a priest or deacon or to the sons of either, and barred anyone from marrying the daughter of a priest's or deacon's wife. Effectively, the families of priests, perfectly respectable members of society prior to this Reformation, were to be deprived of any social position whatever.

Having dealt with the clergy, the reformers turned their attention to the aristocracy. Their sexual practices undeniably deviated from Christ's teaching. Divorce was commonplace among them, as was concubinage. Indeed, it was the norm for young noblemen who had not yet entered into their inheritance to engage in a temporary union with a woman of a lower social class. William the Conqueror, surnamed the Bastard in his own day, was the product of such a union. But the Reformers didn't

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<sup>11</sup> George Duby *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, chapter 6

reform either abuse. Rather, they facilitated both. They never sought to prevent noblemen taking a concubine; since the woman had never been united to her lord in sacramental marriage, they had no quarrel with her being cast aside in favour of a noble heiress. The only difference effected here is that whereas the offspring of these unions - perfectly honourable and socially recognised unions, celebrated with the proper legal forms - had once been accepted as second-class heirs, even to receiving their dead father's title in default of any offspring from his official marriage, they were now, through the efforts of the Reformers, to be degraded to the same status as bastards of unknown paternity. This was a logical next step for the Reformers, since the concept of bastard heirs held open the possibility that the 'bastards' of priests could lay claim to their father's estate, and so alienate the patrimony of St. Peter.

Divorce also continued. According to Church teaching divorce was allowed in the case of female adultery, but the separated couple were denied the right to remarry. Far more useful was the concept of consanguinity. The Church had for centuries taught that marriage between relatives was impossible, and it reckoned the degree of forbidden kinship to seven generations (nobody knows why, no scholar at the time could find any justification for it). If a couple were found to be so related then they must part. They were not married. They had never been married. And that meant both were free to contract other unions. And since, for Europe's aristocracy, the rules of consanguinity were all but impossible to observe in practice, almost every union could be dissolved on these grounds. So whilst divorce and remarriage were strictly forbidden the rules could easily be bent without being broken. The Reformers did nothing to end this game, they simply insisted the players must have papal permission for these 'illegal' marriages, and for their subsequent annulments. If this looks like a cynical theory, it was worse in practice.

The story of Queen Bertrade is illustrative. In 1092 King Philip I of France repudiated his wife Queen Berthe and married Bertrade, the wife of his vassal, Fouque of Anjou. He was unfortunate in his timing. Two generations previously, as DUBY demonstrates, there would have been no problem. Philip's grandfather Robert had done exactly the same, and though later Church propaganda makes out he was excommunicated for his sin and reduced to submission by the Church's ban, a study of contemporary records disproves this conclusively. The Church of the early eleventh century regarded Robert as an ally, not an enemy, and recognised each of his three wives in turn as rightfully Queen of France.

But by the time Philip swapped Berthe for Bertrade, the power of the Reformers had grown, and they felt strong enough to enforce their claim to control over marriage. They decided to start at the top, and make an example of the king. They denounced the union for which he had not sought permission: it was no legal union, Bertrade was a mere concubine. This was by no means the universal opinion. Philip himself plainly did not think he was doing anything wrong. Though the Reformers portrayed him as an elderly lecher led astray by an ambitious slut, the truth is that it was his kingly duty which moved Philip to act. In twenty years of marriage Berthe had produced only one sickly son. He needed back-up heirs. Most French bishops accepted the marriage and

attended the solemn ceremonials. Only bishop Yves of Chartres refused to attend and it was he who initiated the campaign against Queen Bertrade. Yves was committed by his own position to an absolute dedication to the Reform. He had been imposed on Chartres, displacing an anti-Reformer, by the Reforming Pope Urban II, in the teeth of a local, traditionalist opposition shocked by this innovation - a bishop was 'married' to his diocese, no man could put them asunder. So it was Yves of Chartres who initiated the attack, which proceeded in the usual manner; Philip was excommunicated, creating a dangerous political split in France with the attendant risk of civil war.

As DUBY demonstrates, it was politics which dictated the king's need for divorce and his choice of bride, and politics forced him to keep her, despite the Church's opposition, for the sake of the two young sons she soon bore him. Nobles with a hopeful eye on the throne were naturally happy to deny the legality of Bertrade's marriage and the legitimacy of her sons. That way only Berthe's sickly offspring stood between them and an empty throne. William Rufus was among this group, doubtless encouraged by his father's successful usurpation of the English crown. But the Church's principal tool against Philip was Fouque of Anjou. And the choice of such a tool shows what depths the Reformers were prepared to plumb to further their own ambitions.

Bertrade left Fouque on her own initiative, chroniclers of the period state, to avoid being "sent away like whore", a real risk with Fouque who seems to have had at least four wives before her, though he was widowed only once. And this was no elopement, Philip plainly had Fouque's consent, and Fouque made no initial protest as the wronged husband. He was put up to that later by the Reformers who, insisting he was still married, would not let him take another wife. Fouque was in the power of the Church. He had usurped the lands and title of his elder brother - at the Church's instigation, his brother being an opponent of the Reform - and then kept him in such close confinement that he went mad. Naturally, in such circumstances, his own grip on the title was a little shaky, but the Church exercised its power to confirm legitimacy on his behalf, just as it exercised the same power against his lord.

Philip's supporters are just as significant. Among those vassals the Reformers could not inspire to revolt, was William, Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitiers, who broke up by force a meeting of cardinals and bishops called in his territory to condemn his lord. William, who is reckoned as the first Troubadour, fought jousts with the arms of his ladylove blazoned on his shield and satirised in song ladies who, at instigation of clerics, "frustrate the love of knights".<sup>12</sup> We have here the first shoots of the cult of Courtly Love, which were to break into such exuberant growth in the next century.

### **The Matter of Britain**

Opposition to the Papal Reformation came from two apparently opposite directions. On one side were the purists opposed to the sacralisation of marriage, who held that the Church should stay out of such matters entirely. These went on to denounce all clerical involvement in the exercise of secular power, to condemn the worldly

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<sup>12</sup> George DUBY, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, p159

ambitions of the Reformers, and to teach that the Donation of Constantine had corrupted the Church. On the other, many among the nobility were strenuously objected to the Reform for its attempt to interference in their admittedly colourful sex-lives. Both tended towards feminism, and both reached their apogee in the south west of France. Here the Cathar Church, with its male and female priesthood of extreme ascetics, almost replaced the Roman, and the aristocratic cult of Courtly Love converted sexual pursuit into an elaborate art, and raised woman, the lure of the devil in Rome's teaching, to an object of semi-religious devotion.

The Matter of Britain rose to popularity in Europe in a period of upheaval and heresy generated by the Papal Reformation. It was promoted by the Reformers' opponents, and it was intimately associated with the cult of Courtly Love. The most famous patron of Courtly Love was the granddaughter of William of Aquitaine, Eleanor, Queen, in turn, of France and England, the most powerful and glamorous woman of her day, adored by troubadours, cordially loathed by the Reformers - along with her son and heir, the crusader King Richard the Lionheart, who, the Reformers insisted, only took the cross for his own nefarious ends. William of Newburgh went so far as to blame the failure of the second crusade on Eleanor herself - she went crusading in the company of her then husband, King Louis VII of France. What appalled them most was her attempt to divorce Louis, on her own initiative. The grounds, of course, was consanguinity, and the two were indeed, as was usual, related. But so far from granting the divorce once the matter was made public, Pope Eugene III outlawed any discussion of the fact. Eleanor did eventually get her divorce, by a trick, the Reformers claimed, and for the basest of motives, sex. The wife who complained that her husband was more monk than king had left him in search of 'nuptials closer to her own morals'. Within weeks of her divorce. on 18th May 1152, she had married Henry Plantagenet, Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou, and soon to be King of England.

We can make better sense of Eleanor's motives. She needed a male heir; she had got only two daughters from Louis in fifteen years of marriage, and was now approaching thirty. Of course the Reformers had a theory to explain this: all lecherous women were sterile for their sins, the heat of their passion made them infertile. Eleanor wrecked that theory decisively, bearing a son to Henry in the first year of their marriage, and another seven children, four boys and three girls, in the fifteen or so years that they lived as man and wife.

Eleanor was always a patroness of poets, but the period of her greatest influence on courtly literature was after she left Henry, who had taken a younger mistress, and set up court in her own lands, in Poitiers, around 1170. (The normal recourse, especially at her age, would have been to retire to a convent, which is probably what Henry anticipated.) She was accompanied by her heir, Richard - his elder brother Henry was heir to their father's lands - and was soon joined by her daughter by Louis, Marie of Champagne. The historian Friedrich Heer describes Eleanor's court as "the chief academy of Western Europe for teaching the arts of courtesy"<sup>13</sup> and it was attended by a significant section of Europe's young nobility. And what was taught here

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World*, p166

was precisely and deliberately opposed to the teachings of the Reformers. While the Reformers worked to degrade the position of women and to limit their evil influence on society by reducing them to mere chattels, the ideal of Courtly Love presented the lady as an object of veneration, whose love must be won by devoted service. Sexual attraction, an unmitigated evil according to the Reformers who taught that even married couples sinned by taking pleasure in sex, was elevated by the code of Courtly Love to an ennobling force which could inspire knights to deeds of courage and chivalry and even advance their moral and spiritual development. And the legends of the Matter of Britain became a carrier for this new code of behaviour. It was under the patronage of Marie of Champagne, Eleanor's daughter, that Chrétien de Troyes composed his *Lancelot*, the earliest account we have of the famous love affair between this 'best knight' and Arthur's Queen, and a textbook example of courtly courtship.

The Matter of Britain is intimately bound up with aristocratic resistance to the Reformers. The commonest subject of these Arthurian tales is the courtship and union of a knight and his lady. The lady, commonly, is not given by her kin but bestows herself on the worthy champion, on a rescuer who is frequently a stranger to her and with no priest around to bless the union let alone to check the genealogies! The hero usually begins as a landless knight, holding nothing of his own, who gains the rank and position appropriate to his nobility purely through his own merit, recognised by his lady-love. One romance explicitly takes a stand against the increasing prevalence of primogeniture: "That the eldest brother (strange though true) should have his father's whole inheritance, that death should sever the rights of which their father's life assured them was the cadet's misfortune. Before, they held in common. Now, the eldest holds alone. I will not palter with the truth: that kings, counts, dukes should suffer dispossession of their acres, all but the oldest son - what an outlandish ordinance."<sup>14</sup>

The story of the Grail, as Loomis points out, was always a part of the Matter of Britain, always intimately linked to Arthur's realm and Arthur's court. Perceval is its usual protagonist. This story begins with the boy being raised in a deserted region far from the haunts of men. His mother hopes to keep him from all knowledge of chivalry, having lost her husband to knightly violence. So when Perceval makes his way to Arthur's court he is a child of no known parentage. He gains rank and position through his marriage. His wife, in many versions, is the Grail-bearer herself, whom he first sees carrying the sacred vessel in procession.

The beautiful Grail-bearer and the Grail procession make their appearance in the very first Grail romance to have come down to us. In Chrétien de Troyes *Perceval* the vessel which the maiden carries contains just one Mass-wafer. Loomis remarks on "Chrétien's blunder of assigning the administration of the sacrament to a woman."<sup>15</sup> and wonders "Why, since women were forbidden by the Church to administer the sacrament, was she chosen for this office?"<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Chapter 1, p17

<sup>15</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p214

<sup>16</sup> R S Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p62

The Grail is borne by a woman and achieved by a knight. This, in a period when the Reformers were preaching that woman is a snare of the devil, and that knights, by virtue of their calling, were damned.<sup>17</sup> Courtly Love was a deliberate inversion of the Reformers' teachings. The entire Matter of Britain was propaganda directed against the papacy. That the Reformers themselves recognised this is quite clear from their response.

### **The Vulgate Rewrite**

The Grail story, Weston points out, met with hostility from the Church. So also did the entire Matter of Britain. But then, in the early thirteenth century, the Arthurian saga was taken up and rewritten in the cloister by Cistercian monks, an order at forefront of the Reform movement. Their version is known as the Vulgate cycle. In five interrelated books it tells the entire story in the form best known today, starting with the origin of the Grail itself in *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, and ending with the collapse of Arthur's kingdom in *La Mort le Roi Artu*. The story of the finding of the Grail is told in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, and it is here we meet Sir Galahad for the first time.

After decades of denouncing Arthurian tales the Reformers decided to write their own. No scholar pretends that the Vulgate cycle is a tale told for amusement. It is, quite frankly, Cistercian propaganda. But why would the monks have chosen such an unlikely vehicle to propagate their views on sex and spirituality? Loomis, still the most influential academic on the subject of Arthurian legend, suggested a change of heart on the part of the clerics: "Though scorned and denounced by the clergy, these conteurs finally won their opponents over".<sup>18</sup> Jessie Weston had put forward an entirely different view: "The remodelling is so radical that it seems most reasonable to conclude that it was purposeful, that the original author of the *Queste* had a very clear idea of the real nature of the Grail, and was bent upon a complete restatement in terms of current orthodoxy."<sup>19</sup>

The Vulgate's *Queste* departs considerably from earlier versions of the story. The Grail knight is now neither Perceval nor Gawain, though both figure in the tale in various stages of transformation. The character of Gawain is completely blackened. From Chrétien's perfect chivalrous knight, foil to the gauche Perceval - a reputation he retained in English romances - Gawain in later French stories had already degenerated into a comic character, lead astray by lust. But the Vulgate transforms him into a lecherous violent lout who ends up slaughtering his dearest friends - a monkish caricature of the vices of knighthood. Perceval fares better: He retains the naivety of his earlier incarnations, but now a virgin accompanied not by his beloved but by his virgin sister, he is a mere sidekick to the new hero, Galahad.

Galahad is not a traditional character with roots in Celtic pagan tradition. He is a purely literary invention, with no existence prior to the Vulgate cycle. The Cistercian writers make him the son of Lancelot by the daughter of King Pellès (magically disguised as Guinevere), who is conceived specifically to accomplish the task from

<sup>17</sup> with the exception of crusaders.

<sup>18</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p273

<sup>19</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p207

which his father, though the best knight in the world, is debarred because of his sin with the Queen. Galahad himself is immune to lust. He is a flawless virgin with no imperfections of character, and predestined for his task, so though his story retains the title 'La Quest del Saint Graal', it is not actually a quest any more. There is no initial failure and subsequent success, no development of character through the experience of hardship and disappointment, there is simply an inevitable progress towards an inevitable finale, with a running commentary on the action from a host of moralising hermits. Most significantly, where once the achievement of the quest brought blessings on all, restoring the Waste Land, now we have the opposite effect.

When Galahad reaches the Grail an apparition of Christ, emanating from it, announces the Grail is to leave Logres 'this same night' because the dissolute inhabitants 'neither serve nor honour it as is its due'. Galahad's vision of the Grail benefits only himself: having delivered the sacred vessel, as instructed, to the holy city of Sarras, he rules reluctantly for a year before his prayer is granted and, dying, he is translated into beatitude. But Arthur's realm is damned by his achievement, and the stage is set for the destruction of the Round Table.

In Weston's view the writers of the Vulgate knew perfectly well what the Grail signified, and deliberately inverted the story. Others argue that the Grail had no meaning before the Cistercians imposed their own on it. Richard Barber defines the Vulgate story as a "radical rethinking of the idea of the Grail from the hints and half-thought-out ideas of earlier writers."<sup>20</sup> Richard Cavendish states that the Vulgate cycle "imposed order and coherence on the whole rambling Matter of Britain" and that the surviving Grail romances are not, as Weston thought, half understood remnants of an heretical legend, but "stages in the making of a Christian myth."<sup>21</sup> Yet it is not only Weston's opinion, it is demonstrable fact that the Vulgate deliberately inverted the themes of Courtly Love so prominent in the original Grail stories.

An incident from the adventures of Sir Bors provides a sufficient illustration. Bors is Lancelot's cousin, one of the companions who comes close to achieving the Grail. The *Queste* tells how, after many tribulations, he finds rest in an abbey where the saintly abbot is able to explain to him the significance of his experiences, and the meaning his dreams. Bors had dreamt he saw a rotten stump about to totter, and two lilies, one of which leaned to other and "would have robbed it of its whiteness"<sup>22</sup> but that a venerable old man parted them so that neither touched the other, and both grew into trees laden with fruit. This dream, the abbot explained, related to one of his earlier adventures, in which he rescued of a maiden from her abductor.

The rescuing of a maiden is of course a commonplace of Arthurian romance, and the usual result would be that the hero is rewarded by her love and her hand in marriage. But not so in the Vulgate *Queste*. Bors never touches the girl. He is a pure soul on a spiritual quest; he has known a woman only once in his life and he deeply regrets his error. But though he had made no lustful mistake in his conduct towards this particular maiden, his conscience is still troubled. For in order to rescue the girl,

<sup>20</sup> Richard Barber, *King Arthur, Hero and Legend*, p75

<sup>21</sup> Richard Cavendish, *King Arthur and the Grail*, pp 167 &128

<sup>22</sup> *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. P M Matarasso, p198



Bors had been forced to abandon his own brother to the mercies of his brutal captors. He had done no wrong, the abbot assures him, for which was it better to let perish, the rotten stump or the lilies? His sinful brother Lionel was the rotten stump. The lilies were the maiden and her abductor. The old man was Our Lord, whose instrument Bors had been. That both lilies grew into fruit-laden trees indicated that great lineages would arise from these two. But this could not have happened if Bors had not parted them. If the knight had succeeded in ravishing the girl, if by this foul deed she had lost her maidenhead, the wrath of God would have condemned them to sudden death and eternal damnation - that's both of them, the rapist and his victim.

Weston suggested the Vulgate's perversion of the original meaning of the Grail was quite deliberate. Of course she is right. P M Matarasso, in the introduction to her translation of the *Queste*, actually describes it as an 'anti-romance': "The stage is the same and so are the players, but all the accepted values are inverted."<sup>23</sup> The Vulgate writers were not won over. They adopted the Matter of Britain, not because it was a suitable vehicle for their teachings, but precisely in order to subvert a propaganda weapon aimed at themselves. Not only their Grail quest but their entire Arthurian story is a deliberate perversion of the original.

The tragic fall of Camelot, the loss of Arthur's Golden Age, is the culmination of the Vulgate story. In Geoffrey's history it is political intrigue and treachery which bring this about. In the Vulgate version, it is due to exactly that lay conduct which most exercised the Reformers, the sin which, they claimed, brought defeat on the second crusade - sex: Arthur's kingdom is destroyed by adultery, incest, and, most especially, by Courtly Love.

The principal courtly lovers are, of course, Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. The best known element of the Arthurian saga is the tale of how their love destroys the fellowship of the Round Table. But the story is familiar because of the Vulgate rewrite. The Vulgate formed the basis of Malory's *Mort d'Arthur* and Malory in turn inspired Tennyson. **The monks' version of Arthur's doom is the one that has come down to us, but there is nothing of this tale in earlier versions.**

True, Guinevere is a traitress and adulteress in Geoffrey's history, but her co-conspirator is Mordred: Geoffrey knows nothing of Lancelot. For his account of Guinevere's conduct Geoffrey is drawing on Welsh originals, we know, for fragments survive. But in these Welsh tales Guinevere is as likely to be assaulted, raped, or kidnapped as to willingly take off with Arthur's rival. It is accepted that she is, in fact, a symbol of sovereignty, even Sovereignty personified, so that adultery or abduction of his Queen are mytho-poetic references to an attempted usurpation of Arthur's throne. The Lancelot story is something entirely different.

Lancelot is Queen's Champion, a position first held by Gawain - one romance tells how both men attempt to rescue her from an abductor. The Queen's Champion, the young knight who serves Sovereignty and courts her, is not Arthur's rival but his heir: Gawain is his sister's son. This symbolic meaning may have been lost in the continental romances, but Lancelot, before the Vulgate got hold of him, is never

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<sup>23</sup> *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, P M Matarasso, Introduction, p15

Arthur's enemy. No harm comes to Camelot from his love of the Queen. Their love story originally ended with Lancelot's elevation to the kingship. On Guinevere's death, broken-hearted, Lancelot determined to leave Arthur's court and return home to Brittany. So Arthur and his knights elect to accompany their friend and assist him in wresting his father's throne from the clutches of the usurper Claudas.

The familiar story of Arthur's demise at the hands of his own son, product of an incestuous union with Morgan le Fay, also originates with the Vulgate storytellers. Mordred's earliest appearance as Arthur's enemy is in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, for which, as usual, that writer had a source, the Camlann entry in the *Welsh Annals* which says both Arthur and 'Medraut' died in that battle, though it doesn't specify that they were on opposite sides. Geoffrey's Mordred is Arthur's nephew, the son of his sister Anna by her legitimate husband, Loth of Lodonesia, and the brother of Gawain. During Arthur's absence on the Continent fighting the Romans, Mordred attempts to usurp both his throne and his Queen, but this original Mordred is no nemesis prepared for Arthur by his own sin. Though Arthur the lecher and fornicator was already a part of ecclesiastical legend by Geoffrey's time, appearing in that character in the *Welsh Saints Lives*, it was the Cistercian writers of the Vulgate Cycle who conceived of an Arthur who had sex with his sister. The story is an illustration of the dangers inherent in any unregulated union. When sex occurs outside marriage, purely on the impulse of the participants and with no cleric present to check the genealogies of the offending couple, there is no telling what evil may follow. The consequence in this case was the destruction of a country. But then of course, Britain was already damned by the achievement of the Grail.

The original Matter of Britain was directed against the Reformers, and well they knew it. They subverted the story because they feared its influence would undermine their own preaching. We have further evidence of their concerns in the *Jeu d'Adam*, a twelfth-century play designed to be performed in church and directed at precisely the same audience as the Arthurian romances, the nobility. It is a play for four characters, Adam, Eve, God and the Devil. It presents the original paradisaical state of Eden as being due to these characters observing the correct feudal relationships: Adam is God's vassal, Eve is Adam's vassal, God's sub-vassal. But the Devil enters in, introducing equality between man and wife, and suggesting to Adam "you will be the Creator's peer". Adam at first resists his blandishments, but is finally persuaded by his wife to eat the apple, remarking "I will believe you because you are my peer". Adam's sin is to treat his wife as an equal. The fall from grace, the origin of suffering and sin, is all down to this subversion of the natural hierarchy. The play ends on a warning - beware of poets!<sup>24</sup>

The Reformers knew what they were up against. The Grail legend was indeed directed against the papacy, like the rest of the Matter of Britain and the ideal of Courtly Love itself. And as those who opposed the papacy were, by definition, heretics, ineluctably it was heretical. But what exactly was the Grail heresy?

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<sup>24</sup> George Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, p213-6

### **Wolfram's *Parzival***

The prime evidence for the Gnostic Grail has always been *Parzival*. Its author, Wolfram von Eschenbach, was a German knight and poet whose floruit is between 1195 and 1220; there is no exact date for his *Parzival*. But it was composed later than the *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes, the work which scholarship has determined was Wolfram's principal source. Wolfram, however, makes a very different claim.

According to Wolfram, Chrétien did not tell the story aright, and his is the true version. He had it from Kyot de Provence, who found the prime version in Toledo - a city liberated from the Moors a century earlier, along with its vast library of ancient texts. The text which Kyot discovered was written in heathenish script, so that to read it he had first to learn its alphabet "without the art of necromancy".<sup>25</sup> Its author, Flegetanis, was a descendant of Solomon, though a heathen on his father's side who worshipped a calf. Flegetanis was an astrologer who read hidden secrets in the constellations. He discovered, and reverently spoke of, a thing called the Gral.

Wolfram's 'Gral' is certainly not taken from Chrétien. In Chrétien's story the Grail, which is not called holy, is clearly a vessel for serving food, and so it appears in most of the later tales, as a platter or a chalice. In *Parzival* it is not a vessel of any kind, but a stone on which, once a year, a dove alights bearing a single host from heaven, from which it derives its power. Wolfram gives it another name, *lapsit exillis*. It has the power to heal, to maintain the youth of those in its presence over centuries, and to supply whatever food and drink is desired. The entire Grail company have, and need, no other source of sustenance. This stone was brought to earth from heaven during the fight between Lucifer and the Trinity by those angels who took no part in the battle. After the coming of Christianity guardianship of the Grail passed from these neutral angels to Christians of a particular lineage. The head of this lineage, the Grail king, must marry and beget offspring, but his knights are celibates, garbed in white robes marked with a red cross, and called Templeisen. The castle where they guard their charge is sited on a mountain named Munsalvaesche, and can only be found by those destined to find it.

Here in Wolfram's *Parzival* are many of the elements that alternative history sees in the Grail story. It is in the possession of a particular bloodline. It is guarded by Templars, the order of crusader knights extirpated for heresy in 1307. And Wolfram tells us frankly that there is a secret connected with the Grail.

Those scholars who deny the Grail's links to heresy are obliged to discount Wolfram's testimony. They have to insist he can't have meant what he said. Richard Barber<sup>26</sup> states that Wolfram's Templeisen, despite their robes, clearly weren't Templars, and counsels against taking literally his claims about Kyot. Wolfram's sources, aside from his own creative genius, were the known texts of Robert de Boron and Chrétien, who invented the tale (and so couldn't possibly have told it wrongly). Loomis, decades previously, put Wolfram's "preposterous" story of Kyot down to his "love of mystification".<sup>27</sup> But most extreme is A T Hatto, translator of the Penguin

<sup>25</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Chapter 9, p232

<sup>26</sup> Richard Barber *The Holy Grail, Imagination and Belief*, p179

<sup>27</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p197

*Parzival*. He states that Wolfram had no source other than Chrétien and attributes his departures from this original to his “barefaced style of fabulation”.<sup>28</sup> His transformation of the Grail’s form from a vessel to a stone was due to his misreading of the French, or simply a personal preference.<sup>29</sup> As for the Kyot business, those scholars who give it any credit are “out of touch with reality”, but Hatto will refrain from being quite as insulting towards them as he would like to be, both because this is against the convention of scholarship, which require a public show of respect for one’s opponents’ intelligence, and also because these fools are “innocuous and self-supporting”. Having poured scorn on anyone who might hold a different opinion from his own he then expresses the pious hope that someone other than himself will eventually provide the necessary evidence to support that opinion: “one day a far more learned, formidable, and above all blunt scholar than I will arise to bury the Kyot controversy for ever.”<sup>30</sup>

Hatto’s wish, so intemperately expressed, has no hope of fulfilment. It would require proving a negative, and there is no possibility that the surviving historical record could contain absolute proof that Wolfram did not have contact with an historical Kyot. Hatto’s theory, however, can be conclusively disproved. Wolfram’s source is no joke, and his *lapsit exillis* cannot be put down to a personal whim. The reference is to alchemy.

The conventional view of alchemy is that it was a foolish superstition spawned in the ignorance which proceeded scientific understanding. But it is actually a Gnostic system of belief and practice, a religion rather than a pseudo-science, strongly linked to astrology. Behind it lay the Hermetic belief that all matter was imbued with the creative spirit of the divine. The alchemist, by his experiments and in concert with the movements of the heavenly bodies, could liberate this divine spirit within the *materia prima*, the substance which forms the basis of his work (some hold that the *materia prima* was nothing other than the alchemist’s own soul). At the successful conclusion of the work, the *materia prima* would be transmuted into the *lapis philosophorum*, the Philosopher’s Stone, which could raise all material bodies to their true state of perfection, base metal to gold, the sick to health, the aged to youth.

Another name for the Philosopher’s Stone was *lapis exillis*, the Uncomely Stone, so called because the unenlightened cannot apprehend its true nature. In *Parzival* an alternative name for the Grail is *Lapsit exillis*. It prolongs the lives and renews the youth of those who live in its presence, and death cannot come even to the mortally sick for a week after they have looked upon it. By its power, Wolfram tells us, the phoenix burns to ashes and is reborn - the phoenix is an alchemical symbol for the successful transmutation. And Wolfram says the story of the Grail was discovered by Kyot the Provençal in Toledo, written in heathenish script.

Kyot is plainly a Germanised Guiot, and apparently there was a Guiot de Provens who wrote verse in praise of the Templars and who visited Mayence, in Germany, in

<sup>28</sup> *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, A T Hatto, *An Introduction to a Second Reading*, p418

<sup>29</sup> *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, A T Hatto, *Foreword*, p8

<sup>30</sup> *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, A T Hatto, *An Introduction to a Second Reading*, p427

1184.<sup>31</sup> But perhaps he is not our Kyot. Perhaps Wolfram invented his source. But he did not invent the transportation and translation of Arabic texts in his period. In the twelfth century the alchemical legacy of the ancient world, preserved by an Islamic culture then at the height of its greatness and far more tolerant and intellectual than the regions under Rome's dominion, began to filter back into Europe. No scholar denies this. Among the texts transmitted is the Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus. The likely source of such infiltration is those Islamic lands which bordered on western Christendom, that is, Sicily, southern Italy, and Spain. Wolfram directs us to Spain. His story of Kyot is not intended to tease us. He is talking about a particular text, perhaps the Emerald Table itself. His 'Gral' is the Philosopher's Stone of the alchemists. Alchemy and Gnosticism are closely linked: Hermetic texts were found in the Nag Hammadi library.

Some have seen in the story of Kyot evidence for a purely Islamic source for the Grail story, but that is not what Wolfram says. He tells us that Kyot, having learned of the Grail from Flegetanis' script, also learned that it was now in the hands of Christian men. He turned to the Christian world to search for further evidence. He searched in France, of course, but also in the Celtic countries, Ireland and Britain, but it was in Anjou he found what he was looking for. Wolfram's Parzival, like Chrétien's Perceval, is surnamed the Welshman, but his father is Gahmuret the Angevin. The Angevin lords, at the time Wolfram wrote, were the sons and grandsons of Eleanor of Aquitaine, arch-enemy of the Papal Reformation.

It was in the south of France, in the area once under Gothic rule, that the Gnostic Cathar Church took such hold it threatened to replace the Roman. Rome's response was the Albigensian Crusade, which climaxed in 1244 with the fall of the Cathar stronghold of Montsegur in the Pyrenees. Montsegur means "mount of Salvation", the same name that Wolfram gives to his Grail Castle, Munsalvaesche. Young Parzival is directed to this mysterious place by his uncle, a hermit. Hermits figure large in other Grail romances, but Wolfram makes a point of saying the ascetic abstained not only from meat, but from fish also: Cathar perfecti were vegans. And Cathar perfecti were frequently men and women of the world before they received the Consolamentum, which is exactly the case with Parzival's uncle, who confesses he was once a true knight, "I never fled the field; nor am I innocent of love."<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the monk Reformers preached that no layman could attain to the perfection of their own unsullied virginity, preserved from boyhood in the cloister.

In Wolfram's story it is from his hermit uncle, and from his mother, that the naive Parzival learns his religion. Entirely ignorant of the subject, he asks his mother, "What is God?" She replies: "My son, I shall tell you, just as it is. He Who took on a shape in the likeness of Man is brighter than the sun. My child, take this wise saying to heart: pray to Him, when in need. His steadfast love never yet failed the world. Then there is one called Lord of Hell. He is black, perfidy cleaves to him. Turn your thoughts away from him and treacherous despair."<sup>33</sup> Now the Cathars, like all Gnostics, were

<sup>31</sup> Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh & Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, p256

<sup>32</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Chapter 9, p234

<sup>33</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Chapter 3, p71-2

Dualists: They believed in two opposing principals of Good and Evil. Of course orthodox Christianity also believes in the struggle between Good and Evil, and in a Devil who wars against God. But in orthodox Christianity the Devil is God's creature, not his equal: God made the world and all that is in it. The Cathars held that the maker and ruler of this world, Rex Mundi, is evil. We are his prisoners here in the realm of matter: Christ descended from the world of light to this fallen realm in order to bring us the message of salvation and to guide us back to our true home. And Parzival's mother does not say God made the world, only that he will not fail it. She doesn't even say that Christ became man, only that he took on human likeness.

More revealing still is the hermit uncle's version of the Fall of Lucifer. His account appears perfectly orthodox, Lucifer and his comrades were angels who elected to disobey their lord. But then he comments: "As angels they had no gall: so where in God's name did they find the malice that makes them wage ceaseless war, whose reward in Hell is so bitter?"<sup>34</sup> This is a summation of the Dualists' argument against Christian orthodoxy, the question known to orthodox theologians as 'the problem of evil': If the Good God created all, how did evil come into being? True, this falls somewhat short of a frank confession of heresy. But I cannot see how it could have approached much closer without both *Parzival* and its author being consigned to the flames.

Even Loomis remarks that Wolfram is "strangely tinged with unorthodoxy",<sup>35</sup> for he advocates religious toleration, a doctrine absolutely at odds with the teachings of the Reformers. This is plain in *Parzival*, and even plainer in his Carolingian epic, *Willehalm*. Other scholars have observed it, and praised it as an inexplicable anomaly. Loomis compares it to Liberal Protestantism. Such anachronism is unnecessary. Religious toleration was a prime tenet of contemporary heresy. Friedrich Heer gives us a pertinent example: "Between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries the Bogomil Church in Bosnia, true to its pacifist convictions, acted as peacemaker between the monarch and the aristocracy, Catholics and Bogomils, Hungarians and Turks."<sup>36</sup>

Hatto also notes a connection between Wolfram and heresy, but fails to understand it. He observes that Wolfram contradicts his own story in respect of the neutral angels, the original guardians of the Grail. When the hermit Trevrizent first tells Parzival about them he says that they returned to heaven. But later in the story Trevrizent confesses that he lied, there are no neutral angels, all those who fell from heaven are damned in perpetuity. Hatto suggests Wolfram's retraction was due to his being 'pulled up' by a theologian for this 'unguarded statement'.<sup>37</sup> The statement is not merely unguarded, it is heretical. But it is not original.

This was known to Grail scholars long before Hatto wrote. Loomis refers to the work of a German scholar, published in 1911: "Hertz adduced the testimony of the folklorist Sébillot that the old folk near Mené in Brittany believed the neutral angels to

<sup>34</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Chapter 9, p236

<sup>35</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p220

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World*, p206

<sup>37</sup> *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, A T Hatto, *An Introduction to a Second Reading*, p436

have been sent down to earth for a time and to have assumed the form of fairies.”<sup>38</sup> W Y Evans Wentz, in *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, recorded the same belief in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Mann: those angels who did not fall all the way with Lucifer were trapped on earth when heaven’s gate closed, and became the fairies.

Wolfram didn’t invent the neutral angels, he had a source for them and that source wasn’t Chrétien. It is a common mistake to equate the ‘earliest surviving’ with the ‘first produced’. The earliest surviving Grail romance may be Chrétien’s *Perceval* but Chrétien himself tells us his was not the earliest version. He had the story from a book given him by his patron Count Philip of Flanders who commissioned him to render this, “the finest story ever related in a royal court”,<sup>39</sup> into rhyme. Who wrote the story in that book, what its author’s sources were, we cannot know. But the ultimate origin of the tale, most scholars accept, is in Wales.

The Grail story was already told in royal courts before Chrétien wrote, he tells us. The author of the *First Continuation* says it was the favourite tale of the Comte de Poitiers.<sup>40</sup> The title of Comte de Poitiers was united with that of duc d’Aquitaine in the eleventh century and for most of the twelfth century the honour was held by a woman. Eleanor, queen consort first of France and then of England, was Duchess of Aquitaine and Countess of Poitiers from the death of her father in 1137 to her own death in 1204. The count in question would have to be her father, her grandfather or, more likely, her son Richard the Lionheart, who was inaugurated as co-ruler of her domains in 1170. Richard, of course, was an Angevin on his father’s side, as was Wolfram’s Parzival, although surnamed the Welshman. And according to the *First Continuation* the source of the Grail story was Bleheris, who was Welsh by birth and origin. So the written record presents us with a Grail story preceding Chrétien’s, told to the favourite son of Queen Eleanor, principal promoter of the Matter of Britain and the concept of Courtly Love, by a well-known Welsh storyteller named Bledri.

Wolfram’s neutral angels are not a whimsical addition of his, they are clearly taken from his source and that source is Celtic. It is also Christian, and heretical - the neutral angels, the fairies, are the pagan gods of the Celts, denounced as demons by the Church of Rome. Which means that the storyteller who gave out that the Grail was in the hands of the neutral angels before Christian men took charge of it saying exactly the same as R S Loomis. But he is saying it in the twelfth century. Wolfram says that he, unlike Chrétien, knew the true story of the Grail. If we were to take him at his word we could hardly escape the conclusion that Wolfram knew as much as R S Loomis about the Grail’s true origins.

As for the connection between the Celtic Grail with the Philosopher’s Stone, the written record cannot tell us whether it was Wolfram or his source which identified the one with the other, but at any rate that identification was made by the early thirteenth century at the latest.

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<sup>38</sup> R S Loomis: *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p215

<sup>39</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances - Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, line 67, p375

<sup>40</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p193

### **The Underground Stream**

"There is a stream of tradition" Weston tells us, "running as it were underground..."<sup>41</sup> The Blake scholar Kathleen Raine uses the same metaphor to describe the same process: "Neo-Platonism may be compared to an underground river that flows through European history, sending up, from time to time, springs and fountains; and wherever its fertilizing stream emerges, there imaginative thought revives, and we have a period of great art and poetry."<sup>42</sup> This underground stream came to the surface in twelfth-century Europe, when alchemical texts from the Muslim world were infiltrating Christendom, and the last Gnostic Church in the west was established in the Languedoc. Among the great art and poetry of the period the Grail theme is prominent. Weston insisted there was more than a temporal connection between the two. She had her critics at the time: one of them, she reports, dismissed her theory as little more than ingenious speculation, a criticism Richard Barber repeats in 1986,<sup>43</sup> in exactly the same words. But it is Loomis who is thought to have made the case against her.

The academic case against the heretical Grail has not moved beyond Loomis. He argued that in the mass of medieval testimony on heresy there was no reference to the cult Weston postulated, and that if it had been as widespread as she thought it would have been denounced by the ecclesiastical authorities. But Weston associated the Grail in its public phase with groups which certainly did exist. The mass of medieval testimony Loomis refers to was collected by the Inquisition, an organisation which was brought into being precisely to eliminate the Cathars. The Templar order was a subsequent victim. Of course it is the case that there is no evidence in the Church's records for the underground phase of the cult, the period in which, according to Weston's hypothesis, it was secretly preserved in Wales, perhaps in the family of that Bledri who finally brought it to European attention. But the underground transmission of a heresy, if successful, obviously will leave no trace in the records of its persecutors. Gnostic Christianity, despite the Church's ban, did somehow survive to the Middle Ages. We do not know where the Cathar heresy emerged from. That it was brought to Languedoc from the east is the common assumption, but the Bogomil bishop who appears in the records convened a council of a church which already existed. In truth Loomis' case against Weston does not rest on an appeal to logic, or to the written record, but rather on commonly unquestioned and basically racist assumptions.

Loomis does not attempt to prove that there was no underground survival of the pagan mysteries but more simply avers that it is inconceivable that the underground stream of European tradition could ever have flowed beneath the mountains of Wales. By tracing the Grail theme to the Celtic world he holds he has disposed of the heretical Grail. The French men of letters who told these tales linked the Grail inseparably with Arthur's reign and Arthur's realm, and this fact is enough in itself to divorce the theme from any connection with Mohammedan, Albigenian or late Hellenic cults. But there

<sup>41</sup> Jessie Weston, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, p137

<sup>42</sup> Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Antiquity*, p4

<sup>43</sup> Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, p67, Richard Barber, *King Arthur, Hero and Legend*, p185



is a more logical deduction.

The Grail cannot be divorced from Arthur. So when a medieval storyteller connects the Grail with contemporary heresy, he connects Arthur with heresy. And perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. Arthur was remembered by his own people as a Christian king, their leader in the struggle to free their land from the pagan Saxons. It is as a Christian champion that he went down in European tradition, one of the nine worthies, alongside the pagans Hector, Alexander and Julius Caesar, and the Jewish heroes Joshua, David and Judas Maccabeus, grouped with the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne and the crusader Godfrey de Bouillon, the first Frankish ruler of Jerusalem. But Arthur's legend spread through twelfth-century Europe in the teeth of the Roman Church's opposition. Roman Churchmen denied his very existence. And the Reformers encouraged the view that the Celtic world was, for the purposes of conquest and colonisation, on a par with the Islamic world and pagan eastern Europe: It was outside Christendom.

Wolfram's *Parzival* connects Arthur with heresy. Of course Wolfram could be wrong. But if it turns out he's right, then we are surely on the way to solving the principal mystery of Arthur.

## Chapter 6

### Perfidious Britons

*There was a prophet of the people in the time of the Britons called Gildas. He wrote about their misdeeds, how they so angered God that in the end he caused the army of the English to conquer their land and utterly destroy the strength of the Britons. And that was the result of the irregularity of the clergy and the lawlessness of the laity.*

*Wulfstan, early 11th century<sup>44</sup>*

#### **The Celtic Church**

Was there a British heresy associated with King Arthur? The Grail origin legend, the story of Joseph of Arimathea, does look like a claim to an alternative origin for British Christianity, outside the authority of Rome. One would not now expect such a claim to be taken seriously. But it was once.

The story of Joseph may have begun as a Grail legend, but it was soon incorporated into Glastonbury Abbey's official version of its own history, interpolated into William of Malmesbury's account of its foundation. It gained a wider acceptance, supported as it was by Gildas' statement that Britain was converted during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. According to the Reverend Lionel Smithett Lewis (vicar of Glastonbury in the 1920s), the Church Councils of Pisa in 1409, Constance in 1417, Sienna in 1424, and Basle in 1434, all granted precedence to the English bishops on the grounds that their country was the first in Europe to receive the Christian faith, "immediately after the Passion of Christ".<sup>45</sup> By the time of the Glorious Revolution official, state-enforced history insisted on this non-Roman foundation of the British Church. It is probably the only aspect of this official post-Reformation history to be rejected absolutely by modern English historians.

There are few opinions orthodox history holds to more strongly than that the Celtic Church was never in any sense separate from the Roman. Even before the move to eliminate the word 'Celt' from academic existence, historians were having difficulty with the term 'Celtic Church'. The term is useful, and so it is used, for undeniably the Christianity of the non-Saxon inhabitants of the British Isles did possess certain distinctive features, even an unusual organisational structure. But still the existence of an actual name for it causes some disquiet, and academic historians have often found it necessary to stress that when they speak of the Celtic Church they are using a convenient label, and not defining it as an entity in itself. It was merely a branch of *the* Church, which through an accident of history had got out of step with the main body.

The conventional theory is that it was in consequence of the Saxon invasion, rather

<sup>44</sup> *Gildas: the Ruin of Britain*, Michael Winterbottom, introduction, p5

<sup>45</sup> Lionel Smithett Lewis, *St Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury*, Appendix 12.

than through any decision of the native Christians, that the Church in these islands began to deviate from the normal practices of the Mother Church. The Celtic Christians, now isolated by defeat and migration, were unaware of changes introduced on the Continent, most conspicuously in the method of calculating Easter, and so failed to keep pace with them. Also, as Roman civilization decayed around it, the Church in Britain was forced to adapt to a tribal environment - Ireland, of course, had always been tribal, having escaped Roman conquest. Metropolitan bishops became irrelevant among a people who had no cities, and authority devolved to the heads of the great monasteries. By the time of the Saxon conversion, when communications could be re-established, the peculiarities of the Celtic Church were so far developed as to make the 'reunion of Christian brothers' somewhat problematical.

The two Churches, in conventional interpretation, were brought back into contact by Pope Gregory's decision to convert the Saxons. The story is from Bede: Gregory, before ever he was made pope, saw some beautiful Saxon children on sale in the slave-market, and learning they came from a pagan race he at once begged the Pope to send him on a mission to Britain to save this bright-faced folk who were still in the grasp of the Author of Darkness. The Pope was willing, but the people of Rome would not allow Gregory to go so far from the city, so it was only after his elevation to the papacy that he was able to fulfil this desire by proxy, appointing St. Augustine of Canterbury as his missionary to the Saxons. Augustine and his companions landed on English soil in 597, on the island of Thanet, off the coast of Kent.

Augustine has gone down in history as the man who converted the English from paganism. But the pagan English were not the limit of his brief. Pope Gregory, Bede tells us, had made Augustine head of the Church in Britain, with instructions to reorganise it on continental lines. He was to establish his own see in London and consecrate another metropolitan for the see of York, and he was to assume Episcopal authority over all the British Christians. To this end Augustine, with the aid of Aethelbert, king of Kent, summoned the bishops and teachers of the nearest British province to a conference at which he urged them to establish brotherly relations with him in Catholic unity and join with him in God's work of preaching the Gospel to the heathen. He also took the opportunity to point out to them the error of their Easter calculations, and certain other customs of theirs which were at variance with the universal Church. The British clergy were obliged to recognise the rightness of his cause, as he proved his spiritual authority with miracles they were unable to duplicate. But they averred they had not the authority to speak for the entire British Church, so a larger conference had to be called.

Before this second conference the Britons asked the advice of a wise and prudent hermit as to whether they should 'abandon their own traditions at Augustine's demand.' The hermit's advice was that they should ensure Augustine reached the place appointed for the conference before them, and if he rose to greet them when they arrived, this would be proof that he was indeed a man of God, for Our Lord says, 'Take My yolk upon you, for I am meek and lowly of heart'. Augustine failed the test - he

remained seated. He informed the Britons that all he required of them was that they alter their Baptismal rite and their dating of Easter, and assist him in evangelising the Saxons: he was ready to countenance all their other customs. But the British rejected his terms and refused to recognise him as their archbishop, observing that if he had so little regard for them at this stage he would have even less once they had submitted to his authority. According to Bede, Augustine responded "with a threat that was also a prophecy: if they refused to accept peace with fellow-Christians, they would be forced to accept war at the hands of enemies; and if they refused to preach to the English the way of life, they would eventually suffer at their hands the penalty of death."<sup>46</sup>

It fell to the pagan king Aethelferth of Northumbria to fulfil Augustine's prophecy, at the battle of Chester in 613. The British suffered a severe defeat, and among the slain were 1,200 monks from the monastery of Bangor assembled to pray for a British victory. Bede is specific; these deaths are just punishment on the perfidious Britons for their rejection of Augustine. He likens the pagan Aethelferth to the biblical King Saul who smote the enemies of Israel.

Historians still have a great deal of respect for Bede, but they do not put any credence on his interpretation of the Chester massacre, and they dismiss totally his story of Augustine's curse. After all, these events occurred more than a century before he wrote his *History of the English Church and People*; time, and the bitterness of war, must have distorted his perspective. Yet it is undeniable that Augustine's arrival, so far from restoring communications between the British and continental Churches, created a rift which took centuries to mend.

But this rift, according to the orthodox interpretation, must still be regarded as an accident of history. The Celts, throughout their long isolation, had remained 'impeccably orthodox', if a little old-fashioned, and had never disputed the authority of the Roman see. At this first meeting the heavy-handed authoritarianism of the Roman party and the stubborn conservatism of the Celts prevented their immediate reunion, but there was no doctrinal division underlying their centuries-long conflict. The problem, historians insist, was one of diplomacy, not theology. Indeed some are so determined to downplay the conflict you can still read of the two Churches being 'reconciled' at the synod of Whitby.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Synod of Whitby**

Bede is our prime source for this event, and if his story of Augustine's mission may be dismissed as legendary, the synod of Whitby occurred on his home ground and within the lifetime of his tutors and informants. Furthermore, in his account of the Irish mission to Northumbria there is none of the racial bias which marks his attitude to the British Christians. On the contrary he is unstinting in his admiration for the founders of this Irish mission, bishop Aedan of Lindisfarne and Oswald, king of Northumbria.

King Oswald was the son of Aethelferth, the victor of Chester and creator of

<sup>46</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.2.

<sup>47</sup> e.g. Richard Barber, in *The Figure of Arthur*. "It was not until the synod of Whitby in 664, at which the Celtic Church was reconciled with Roman use..." p40

Northumbria, who had united by conquest his own kingdom of Bernicia with its neighbour, Deira, driving its king Edwin into exile. On Aethelferth's death Edwin returned the favour, taking over the united kingdom and driving Aethelferth's sons into exile among their Celtic neighbours. Edwin had converted to Christianity - of the Roman variety - but on his death the kingdom dissolved back into its constituent parts, reverted to paganism, and was conquered by the British king Catwallaun: The godless Cadwalla, Bede calls him, who ruled the kingdom for a year, not as a victorious king but as a savage tyrant. He was defeated and slain by Oswald, whose accession restored both English rule and the Christian faith to a reunited Northumbria. But this was the faith of his exile, the faith of the Picts and the Irish. When Oswald sent for missionaries to help convert his people he sent not to Kent, but to the island of Iona, to the monastery established by Columba in the kingdom of Dal Riada. Iona sent Aedan, who established his monastery on another holy island, Lindisfarne.

This was in 635. The synod of Whitby took place in 664, in the reign of Oswald's brother, Oswy. According to Bede, it was the discrepancy in the dating of Easter which provoked the synod of Whitby. The Northumbrian court was obliged to celebrate Easter on two different dates, for Oswy had married Eanfled, the daughter of his erstwhile enemy Edwin, who with the aid of her Kentish chaplain continued in the faith of her father and observed Easter at the time appointed by Rome. Their son Alchfrid, underking of Deira, also favoured Rome, with the backing and encouragement of Wilfrid, the Roman Church's most forceful proponent and a protégé of Eanfled's from childhood. Thus Oswy's court was divided between the Roman and Celtic practices, which doubtless proved a minor inconvenience in court ceremonial. But the two Churches muddled through for many years, until, Bede tells us, bishop Agilbert of the West Saxons, a friend of both Wilfrid and Alchfrid, paid a visit to Northumbria and "it was decided to hold a synod to put an end to this dispute."<sup>48</sup>

What dispute? Aside from the problem of observing two Easters, Bede does not relate any real difficulties arising from the presence of the two Churches in Northumbria. Indeed he specifies that during Aedan's lifetime (who, he acknowledges, was bound by loyalty to follow the customs of those who had sent him), his wrong observance of Easter was tolerated by all, and he was held in high respect by the Roman bishops of Canterbury and of the East Angles. But since the Celtic Church was established as the Church of Northumbria, under royal authority, it was in fact the Celtic Christians who tolerated the Romans' different customs. It was a tolerance Rome proved unable to reciprocate.

Bede leaves us in no doubt that the Synod of Whitby was not intended to resolve the difference between the two Churches, but to publicly terminate the established Celtic authority in Northumbria. The mere fact that Oswy allowed the meeting to take place shows his decision was already made. The two sides were invited to state their positions; Colman, Bishop of the Northumbrians and Abbot of Lindisfarne, for the Celtic Church, with Wilfrid, priest and Abbot of Ripon, as spokesman for Rome. In Bede's story, Colman was the first to speak: "The Easter customs which I observe

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<sup>48</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.25

were taught me by my superiors, who sent me here as a bishop; and all our forefathers, men beloved of God, are known to have observed these customs. And lest anyone condemn or reject them as wrong, it is recorded that they owe their origin to the blessed evangelist Saint John, the disciple especially loved by our Lord, and all the churches over which he presided."<sup>49</sup>

Bede reports Wilfrid's reply at greater length. In sum, he stated that all the churches throughout the world agreed with Rome's method of calculation, except the Celts, "a few men in a corner of a remote island", and that Rome's authority derived from Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, "to whom our Lord said: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven.'"<sup>50</sup> At this King Oswy ascertained that Colman accepted the speech as scriptural, and claimed no similar authority for Columba, and then passed judgement in favour of Rome with the observation that he did not intend to jeopardise his own chance of passing through heaven's gate by annoying that gatekeeper. In the aftermath of Whitby the adherents of the Celtic Church were invited to choose between conformity with Roman custom, or exile. Colman and many of his monks withdrew to Iona.

Expulsion, not reconciliation, was the end result of Whitby. It cannot have come as any surprise to Colman: only three years before the Celtic monks of Ripon, in the territory of Deira, faced exactly the same penalty when Alchfrid turned their monastery over to Wilfrid. Wilfrid's career is the real key to understanding Whitby. The Romanisation of Ripon made him an abbot; the Romanisation of Northumbria was intended to make him a bishop. And not just any bishop. From the time of Aedan the bishop of Northumbria had been the abbot of Lindisfarne. With the expulsion of Colman Northumbria was without a bishop, and it was Wilfrid's intention to fill that vacancy by having himself made archbishop, not of Lindisfarne, but of York.

This was a highly significant move. To understand it, we have to go back to the original Gregorian plan for the reformation of the British Church, as recorded by Bede. Gregory's intention<sup>51</sup> was that his new British archbishop, Augustine, should establish his own see at London, and consecrate a fellow archbishop for the refounded see of York. Augustine was to have authority over the archbishop of York, but thereafter authority was to reside in whichever of the two archbishops was senior in ordination. Now when Wilfrid set about becoming bishop of York there was no archbishop of Canterbury. The see was vacant. If Pope Gregory's instructions were followed to the letter, and Wilfrid were consecrated before Canterbury received a new archbishop, he would have become the head of the English Church. So, indeed, his biographer Eddius describes him, *caput ecclesiae*<sup>52</sup> - though in point of fact he never achieved that exalted position. Whilst Wilfrid was away in Gaul receiving a Roman consecration (a glorious ceremony involving twelve Gallic bishops and presided over by his old friend

<sup>49</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.25

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bede (*A History of the English Church and People*, I.29) tells us Gregory gave these instructions to Augustine in a letter which he sent along with Augustine's pallium, the symbol of his office as Archbishop.

<sup>52</sup> Eddius 19-20 - see John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p396

Agilbert, now bishop of Paris), back home the ground shifted from under him. Quite suddenly he was deprived of his royal patron.

The details of Oswy's dispute with his son Alchfrid are lost to history, and we do not know if the sub-king of Deira was exiled or executed, but it is certain he was removed from office, and that Oswy then moved against Wilfrid. In concert with the king of Kent he sent a prospective archbishop of Canterbury to Rome for consecration, at the same time appointing an Irishman to the post of Archbishop of York. There was now no vacant archbishopric for Wilfrid to fill; indeed, no vacancy for him at all. Not for the last time, he had overreached himself: his career was now on hold until after the death of Oswy.

There are historians who speak very well of Wilfrid. H P R Finberg, for example, in *The Formation of England*, describes him as "every inch a bishop in the Gallo-Roman style", who "took particular care to surround the liturgy with all the splendours of music, paintings and gorgeous vestments." His opponents, in Finberg's view, are pygmies baiting the great man, too limited of intellect themselves to comprehend his great vision of a Christendom bounded by no provincial or tribal horizon, united in its loyalty to the papal see. But then, Finberg holds that it was under the guidance of the Roman Church that the English people "emerged from barbarism into civilization".<sup>53</sup>

The contrast between Wilfrid's style and that of the Celtic monks is stark indeed. Bede lovingly describes the humble, generous, ascetic Aedan, who cared nothing for worldly trappings, showed neither fear or favour to the wealthy, and strove conscientiously to observe Christ's precepts in his treatment of the poor. He illustrates this with the following tale: King Oswin, son of the last independent king of Deira and for some short time Oswy's colleague in kingship (before the latter murdered him) gave Aedan a horse specially selected from his stable. But Aedan immediately gave it away, complete with its royal trappings, to the first destitute beggar who crossed his path. When the king reproached him Aedan replied that surely the king did not regard the child of a mare as more valuable than the child of God. The king, after pondering the matter, fell on his knees before the bishop and implored his forgiveness, saying he would never again enquire how much of the royal bounty found its way into the pockets of the poor. Soon after, Aedan's clergy found him weeping, for he had come to realise a king as humble as Oswin could not survive long in this world.<sup>54</sup> Nor, it seems, could a clergy of Aedan's calibre: "His life is in marked contrast to the apathy of our own times", writes Bede.<sup>55</sup>

The tone of tender regret with which Bede recalls the banished Irish mission seems to have distracted many historians from what he actually says, and so distorted their understanding of Whitby's historical significance. Bede does not describe a dignified, intellectual debate between the two Churches, but a real conflict. Wilfrid's biographer Eddius is still more forthright. Wilfrid's aim was not simply to point out to these backward Celtic Christians the error of their ways but to "root out from the

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<sup>53</sup> H P R Finberg, *The Formation of England*, pp 49 & 55

<sup>54</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.15

<sup>55</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.5.

Church the foul weeds sown by the Irish."<sup>56</sup> To this end he encouraged Oswy's successor, Egferth, to engage in a series of unprovoked attacks on neighbouring nations still adhering to the Celtic Church. Both English and Irish records emphasise the deliberate destruction of churches. Unquestionably the intention was religious war; Egferth's victories made Wilfrid "bishop of the British, the Irish, and the Picts, as well as of the southern English"<sup>57</sup> in Eddius triumphant phrase. True, Bede's condemnation of this military solution is likely the more typical attitude of Northumbrian churchmen; he complains that Egferth's campaign in Ireland "brutally harassed an inoffensive people who had always been friendly to the English".<sup>58</sup> But Eddius' immoderate language merely underlines what is already plain in Bede's account: The Roman and Celtic Churches were not 'reconciled' at the synod of Whitby: No such prospect was ever envisaged by those who convoked the meeting.

### **Augustine's Mission**

The stark contrast between the facts of the Whitby synod and the conventional interpretation of it give notice that there is something amiss with orthodoxy history's understanding of the Celtic Church. And when we turn to the Canterbury mission, that suspicion is resoundingly confirmed.

Our principal source for the mission, as for the Whitby synod, is Bede, and he is generally regarded as a most reliable historian. But the conventional interpretation of the Canterbury mission modifies Bede's account considerably. Bede tells us Pope Gregory gave Augustine authority over the entire Church in Britain, but that when the new archbishop attempted to exercise that authority the 'perfidious' Britons refused to acknowledge his status or accede to his request for assistance, at which he cursed them. Historians prefer to regard this curse as a later 'interpretation', the history of a bygone era seen through the filter of race-hatred. David Dumville reminds us Bede is no primary source for later sixth-century history, but a secondary one at best. Finberg states that the story which finally reached Bede was "not without some legendary accretions".<sup>59</sup> This may be so, but it doesn't alter the facts.

The facts are that the British and the Saxons were enemies, and **Rome's re-entry into Britain was a political event with predictable military consequences**, understood as such by all the players, including the clergy of distant Rome. Bede portrays Gregory as moved to act by his concern to save Saxon souls, but this pope was no political innocent, naively blundering in to a faraway war. He was a Roman nobleman, an imperialist dedicated to preserving *Romania*, who had served as papal envoy to Constantinople prior to his own election to the papacy. He is reckoned by many historians to be the greatest statesman the Roman Church ever produced. That is to say, he was a diplomat and a politician. When he sent Augustine to Aethelbert's court in 596 the likelihood is he knew exactly what he was doing.

What Gregory was certainly not doing was refounding British Christianity. There is

<sup>56</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p397

<sup>57</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p396

<sup>58</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, IV.26

<sup>59</sup> H P R Finberg, *The Formation of England*, p40



no question of the British Church being moribund when Augustine arrived; Bede records the British churchmen who met with Augustine included "seven bishops, and many very learned men."<sup>60</sup> And even if it were the case, as is commonly assumed, that communications between the two Churches were long ago severed so that the Roman Church was unaware of the nature of British ecclesiastical organisation, still Pope Gregory must have deduced that the British would have some authority structure in place which would be disrupted by his appointment of Augustine at its head. He certainly was aware that placing a newly appointed authority beside an old established one could create difficulties. We have incontrovertible evidence of this, since Bede transcribes into his history the actual correspondence between Augustine and Gregory, copied by his informant Nothelm from the papal archives. (Bede states this in his preface, and no scholar accuses him of lying.)

Augustine's seventh question, in Bede's list, reads: "What are to be our relations with the bishops of Gaul and Britain?" Gregory's reply is unambiguous. Augustine is to act in an advisory capacity only with regard to the Gallic Church: "no official action is to be taken without the authority of the Bishop of Arles, so that the long-established institutions of our fathers may not fall into disuse." There is some elaboration on the theme, with quotations from the Old Testament ("...but thou shalt not move a sickle into thy neighbour's standing corn...") and the statement that the Bishop of Arles has received the pallium, the official badge of archiepiscopal authority. Reference to Britain comes at the end, a simple statement without illustration: "All the bishops of Britain, however, we commit to your charge."<sup>61</sup>

Gregory could have instructed Augustine to show respect for the 'long-established institutions' of the British Church, but conspicuously he did not. So when Augustine ordered the British clergy to conform to the Roman dating of Easter, accept him as their archbishop and join with him in converting the Saxons, he was only following orders. Augustine's arrogance and lack of diplomatic skill are frequently blamed for exacerbating a delicate situation, but it is hard to see how he could have conducted himself within Gregory's brief and still avoid causing deep offence to the British Christians.

It was the pope's choice that Rome's first communication with the British Church in decades should be through the mediation of the most powerful of their enemies' kings. However laudable his intention to save Saxon souls, was it necessary that his missionary to them should also be archbishop of the whole island, and the British not consulted on his appointment? If Gregory expected them to assist Augustine's missionary efforts, why not ask them first, rather than order their co-operation once the mission was established? For there was no logistical reason why his appointee must approach his British flock through the territory of their heathen foe. The division of Britain between the two races ran east/west, not north/south, and the island was then separated from the Continent by only the same narrow, navigable channel that separates us still. If Augustine could land at Thanet, he could equally well have landed at Falmouth

<sup>60</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.2.

<sup>61</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, I.27

## **The British Collapse**

The conventional understanding of the Canterbury mission misses the significance of both place and time. When Augustine arrived, the Saxon kingdom of Kent had been in existence for nearly a hundred and seventy years, originally a small pagan enclave in a Christian ex-province, eventually one of a number of pagan kingdoms expanding into the territory of their Christian enemies. Bede harshly censures the British Christians for failing to bring the word of Christ to their pagan neighbours, but there is no record either of any Roman mission before Augustine.

The reason cannot be that, before Aethelbert's marriage to a daughter of the Frankish royal house, Rome had no diplomatic channel through which to approach the Saxons. The Kent Saxons, from their earliest settlement, maintained excellent communications with the Franks of Northern Gaul; the two tribes were closely related. The Franks received Christianity around the time of Badon, their king Clovis was baptised in 496, according to Gregory of Tours, but another century was to elapse before Rome determined to save the souls of their friends and relatives across the channel. Nor did Augustine's mission follow hard on the heels of Aethelbert's Frankish marriage; Queen Bertha and her chaplain would seem to have been peacefully practising their religion in Kent for some time before Augustine's arrival. But in the early days of his marriage to Bertha, Aethelbert was just one Saxon king among many. By the time of Augustine's arrival, Bede tells us, he 'held Empire' over all Britain south of the Humber.

Bede acknowledges only two Saxon kings before Aethelbert to have achieved such dominion, Ceawlin of the West Saxons, who defeated young Aethelbert in battle in 568, foiling his attempt to gain control of London, and Aelle of the South Saxons, whom John Morris holds to have been the commander of the Saxon forces at Badon. Between Aelle's period and Ceawlin's rise to power are the decades of British dominion, in which no Saxon Bretwalda is claimed. The successful British resistance had re-established native rule over the island, and until the middle of the sixth century it was not challenged. Civil war among the British princes contributed to their downfall, as Gildas, in conventional interpretation, had warned that it would. But another significant factor in the collapse of British power was the outbreak of bubonic plague which swept through the Empire in the middle of the sixth century.

Less remarked on than the medieval outbreak, this was equally as devastating for the more civilized areas, although the races on the fringes of the Empire were much less affected. Its first outbreak in the Empire was in Egypt in 541 or 542, it reached Constantinople by 542, and in 544 it ravaged central and southern Gaul. It reached Ireland in the same year, according to the annalists, and the British outbreak probably occurred around the same time; the Celtic world unfortunately had strong trading links with the Empire. The Saxon inhabitants of Britain seem to have escaped infection, apparently because they had little contact with the British and their trade links with Europe only extended to the lower Rhine and those northern reaches of Gaul where records indicate the plague never reached.

Devastated by the plague, the British and Irish were even worse affected by the

relapsing fever called the 'Yellow Plague' which followed. Its most famous victim was Maelgwn of Gwynedd, the British Gwledic, that Dragon of the Island foremost in Gildas' condemnation of the native rulers. The *Welsh Annals* record his death in 547. The Britons' weakness was their enemies' opportunity, and they were not slow to exploit it. In 552, the Saxon Chronicle relates, the British lost Salisbury to Cynric.

Cynric's advance was halted; the Saxon Chronicle records that he fought the Britons at Barbury in 556, but does not claim a victory for him. The next recorded Saxon attempt to push beyond their old borders was Aethelbert's bid to take London. He was opposed by Ceawlin. Archaeology indicates that the London area continued in British occupation for some time after this battle, so Ceawlin may have fought against Aethelbert as an ally of the Britons. But within a decade he was at war with them, capturing Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester from them in 577. Though the British halted his advance, defeating him on the Wye in 584, they never regained the lands lost to him.

That same decade the kingdom of York, the most important of the British kingdoms of the north, fell to the Saxons. In 580 the joint kings of York, Peredur and Gurci, made an expedition to crush the Saxon kingdom of Bernicia on the Northumberland coast. They were defeated and slain. The Deirans of Humberside were then able to occupy York. These two Saxon kingdoms were so tiny the northern British seem not to have recognised the threat posed to their security, until York fell. The shock of this defeat persuaded them to put aside their internal feuds and unite behind Urien, king of Rheged. The combined British forces came close to exterminating Bernicia, but the assassination of Urien at the instigation of another British kinglest destroyed the alliance. Though Urien's son Owain again defeated the Bernicians, killing their king Aethelric, neither he nor his kingdom long survived the victory. Civil war among the Britons again proved their undoing.

Bernicia recovered. Two years after the arrival of Augustine's mission to Kent, Aethelric's heir Aethelferth finally crushed the northern British princes at the battle of Catraeth. Five years later he took York and overran Deira, forcing king Edwin into exile: Thus the kingdom of Northumbria was born. A decade later he marched against the British of the south-west, defeating the combined forces of Gwynedd, Powys and the lowland Cornovii at Chester in 614 AD - his first assault, Bede tells us, directed against the Bangor monks who had accompanied the British army to the battlefield to pray for God's aid against the heathen foe: "Thus, long after his death, was fulfilled bishop Augustine's prophecy, that the faithless Britons, who had rejected the offer of eternal salvation, would incur the punishment of temporal destruction."<sup>62</sup>

Prophetic powers were hardly necessary. By the time Rome saw fit to re-establish connections with the British Church the boundaries fixed between the two races after Badon had disintegrated, and everywhere the British princes were in retreat or facing a desperate last-ditch struggle. The island of Britain was dominated by two Saxon rulers; in the north the growing power of Aethelferth of Bernicia overshadowed his rivals, and in the south Aethelbert of Kent, ruler of the oldest established Saxon

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<sup>62</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.2.

kingdom, held sway over "all the provinces south of the river Humber"<sup>63</sup> - and received Pope Gregory's emissary.

### **The Politics of Conversion**

Bede relates a delightful tale, replete with pious puns, of how Pope Gregory was moved to send a mission to the English. Seeing some beautiful Saxon children on sale in the slave-market of Rome he was moved to enquire about their origins. Informed they were Angels, and pagans, he remarked they had the faces of angels, and should become joint-heirs with the angels in heaven. Told their country was called Deira, he responded they must be saved from wrath, *de ira*, and called to the mercy of Christ. As the name of their king was Aelle, he said it was right their land should echo the praise of God in the word Alleluia.<sup>64</sup> And who knows, there may even be some truth behind it. But the appeal of this Sunday-school story should not blind us to the fact that in Gregory's period conversion had a political dimension. The Roman Church had something more concrete to offer Aethelbert than eternal life, and with the example of his wife's ancestors before him the Kentish king would have been well aware of it.

Queen Bertha was descended from Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks, whose dynasty, the Merovingians, had done very well out of conversion. At the time of Clovis' baptism his was only one of a number of Germanic kingdoms carved out of the decaying Roman Empire, and not obviously the most prominent, even in Gaul; the Visigothic kingdom was older, more civilized, and Christian from its foundation. But the Goths were Arian heretics, while Clovis was baptised into the Church of Rome. Historians acknowledge that Clovis' conversion laid the foundation of the Franks' future greatness. It legitimised the Franks' dominion in the eyes of their Roman subjects while undermining that of their Gothic neighbours; "its immediate effects were to turn every Catholic priest in Visigothic or Burgundian territory into an agent working for the victory of Clovis".<sup>65</sup> While the Roman clergy outside his domains acted as a fifth column, those within his kingdom encouraged Clovis' expansionist ambitions, inciting him to a holy war against his Christian neighbours. Faced with internal and external aggression, both orchestrated by Rome, the Arian kingdoms ultimately could not stand, as they were finally forced to acknowledge. One historian states that Recared, king of Visigothic Spain between 584 and 601, renounced the Christianity of his ancestors and converted to the religion of the empire "in order to secure his borders". By that time the Franks had consolidated a position of dominance which was to reach fruition in the Imperial coronation of Charlemagne.

Rome's endorsement legitimised and consolidated the Franks' new kingdom. The practical benefits of conversion stood plainly before Aethelbert's eyes when Augustine was allowed to land at Thanet. Though Bede scrupulously evades the question, historians of Dark Age Britain are perfectly aware of the political implications of the Gregorian mission. H P R Finberg, for instance, observes that conversion gave the

<sup>63</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.5.

<sup>64</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.1.

<sup>65</sup> Henry St. Laurence Beaufort Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages*, p 64

Saxon rulers "an air of legitimacy, as against the British princes, to inherit the authority of Rome."<sup>66</sup>

At the end of the sixth century no Saxon ruler had more to gain from Roman approbation than Aethelbert, who had secured a fragile dominance over neighbouring kingdoms, a dominance which might, with Rome's assistance, be cemented into a permanent lordship over Britain. And Aethelbert's ambition was a vital element in Gregory's design, as his instructions to Augustine for the reorganisation of the British Church plainly show.

Gregory's intention was to establish two metropolitan sees in Britain, at London and York, the two capital cities of Britain in the days of Roman dominion. **The plan foundered because it depended on Aethelbert's power, and assumed an authority over the whole island which the Kentish Bretwalda turned out not to possess.** In 601, however, there must have appeared a fair chance of success. London was then under the rule of the East Saxons, whose king Saeberht was Aethelbert's nephew, and willingly followed his lead in accepting the new religion. York was in the hands of the Deirans, who were threatened by the growing power of Bernicia and in need of a powerful ally.<sup>67</sup> The political map is not difficult to plot. "If the Deirans accepted a bishop in York, sent from Kent, they thereby riveted a political alliance with the king of Kent, admitting his stronger power in the north as well as the south. If Aethelbert took Deira under his protection and alliance, he automatically confronted Aethelferth of Bernicia."<sup>68</sup> Had matters progressed to this point, and Aethelbert prevailed, he would have no rival in the old Roman province of Britannia, and with Rome's backing might have founded a dynasty as powerful as that of the Merovingians in Gaul.

It came to nothing. In the north the heathen Aethelferth took York and absorbed Deira before Gregory's plan could become a reality, and in the south a pagan reaction following the demise of Aethelbert and Saeberht forced the Roman Church to retract into Kent. Canterbury, not London, became the principal see of the Roman Church in Britain, and Aethelbert's heirs became rulers of a small Saxon kingdom, eventually to be absorbed by more powerful neighbours. But at the time of Augustine's arrival, the Bretwalda of the south looked to have excellent prospects of a wider and more enduring dominion. The time and place of Rome's re-entry into Britain were not arbitrarily selected, and a pious desire for salvation of souls was far from being the only motive involved, on either the Saxon or the Roman side.

Then what of the British? If conversion to the Church of Rome had political significance for the Saxons, it had a precisely equal significance for their British enemies. Then the conventional view, that in pursuit of Catholic unity Rome made very few demands the British Church, and that these concerned minor issues of ritual and observance, is utterly mistaken. **In requiring the British Church to assist in the conversion of the Saxons, Rome was demanding the British accept the invaders as their fellow citizens, which would mean renouncing all hope of regaining the lands** so

<sup>66</sup> H P R Finberg, *The Formation of England*, p36

<sup>67</sup> John Morris suggests they were in alliance with the Britons against Bernicia, but betrayed them at Catraeth; *The Age of Arthur*, p237

<sup>68</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p301

recently lost to them. And if the British acknowledged the authority of the new archbishop Gregory had sent them, since Augustine was operating from Aethelbert's territory and under his protection, the British would, in effect, be accepting Aethelbert's authority over them.

Finberg remarks that Pope Gregory "seems to have anticipated no great difficulty in forming a united Christian front in Britain."<sup>69</sup> It may be so. He may have calculated that the military strength of the British was so far diminished as to leave them no choice but to submit to his humiliating demands. But to present Rome's approach as a reasonable request for mutual co-operation from fellow Christians is little short of perverse.

Of course that is the picture Bede presents us with: shorn of all political significance, the Roman demands are both mild and legitimate, and the British rejection an act of gross disloyalty for which mass slaughter is an appropriate punishment. But what exactly is the nature of that disloyalty?

'The faithless Britons' is how most translations read. Bede's Latin has *perfidis*, a word he uses elsewhere of heretics. He means it in that sense here. The British churchmen are not his fellow-Christians; in rejecting Augustine they had "rejected the offer of eternal salvation" and placed themselves outside the boundaries of the true Church. This is not some eccentric interpretation of Bede's; racially biased he may be, but the fact remains he is technically correct. The British Christians, in rejecting the archbishop Rome had set over them, were denying Rome the authority she claimed for herself. Regardless of their doctrinal position on any other issue, from the time of the meeting with Augustine they were undeniably schismatic. And the consequence of schism was exactly as Bede had Augustine predict: war.

Perhaps Augustine never said it; but Gregory and Augustine were contemporaries of Recared. The lessons of recent political history cannot have been lost on either of them. The conversion of the Franks had not resulted in peace with their Christian neighbours. Their Christian neighbours were Arian heretics - legitimate prey. Prophetic powers, as said, were hardly necessary: The military consequences of the Britons' refusal to surrender to Rome were entirely predictable. With the example of the Merovingian dynasty before them, the conversion of Hengest's descendants, or of any other Saxon royal house, could only encourage them to escalate their attacks on the British Christian kingdoms. Rome cannot even be exonerated for the pagan Aethelferth's slaughter of the Bangor monks - what better way to demonstrate to the Roman mission that he would make a more effective sword-arm than his rival Aethelbert?

Perhaps Augustine never said it; but then, did it really need saying? **Rome had knowingly placed the British Christians in an invidious position. They must either accept the Saxon dominion over Britain, or declare themselves schismatics and face the consequences.** The British did not submit, war commenced between the newly converted nations and the older Christian kingdoms of the island. Bede's history concludes with a summary of the state of play in the year 731: "At the present time, the

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<sup>69</sup> H P R Finberg, *The Formation of England*, p39

Picts have a treaty of peace with the English, and are glad to be united in Catholic peace and truth to the universal Church. The Scots who are living in Britain are content with their own territories, and do not contemplate any raids or stratagems against the English. The Britons for the most part have a national hatred for the English, and uphold their own bad customs against the true Easter of the Catholic Church; however, they are opposed by the power of God and man alike, and are powerless to obtain what they want. For, although in part they are independent, they have been brought in part under subjection to the English."<sup>70</sup>

It was not until 768 that the Welsh Church agreed to 'unite in Catholic peace and truth to the universal Church' and accept the Roman Easter, over a century and a half after the Canterbury mission. By that time Saxon military aggression had reduced the independent British kingdoms to the western margins of the island.

It might seem obvious that the Welsh, like the Goths before them, conformed in order to secure their borders. But no respectable historian makes the comparison. Dark Age Britain has always to be treated as a special case, entirely outside the rules of normal history and politics.

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<sup>70</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, V.23

## Chapter 7

### The Johannine Tradition

*I, therefore, because he loved me, drew nigh unto him softly... his feet were whiter than any snow, so that the earth there was lighted up by his feet, and that his head touched the heaven: so that I was afraid and cried out, and he, turning about, appeared as a man of small stature, and caught hold on my beard and pulled it and said to me: John ...*

*The Acts of John, 2nd century<sup>71</sup>*

#### The Celtic Sleepwalkers

The theory of the impeccably orthodox Celtic Church cannot stand on its own. Historians have found it necessary to create another hypothesis to support it, what we might term the Sleeping Beauty theory of Dark Age Britain. If the Celtic Church was not deliberately separate from the Roman, then the separation must have been accidental. Changes agreed on the Continent were not implemented in Britain only because they were unknown. Communications had been severed. But how could that be, when only the narrow strip of the channel separated the island Christians from their continental brethren? It was not only that the coming of the Saxons somehow formed an impenetrable barrier between the ex-provincials and the wider world. Also, deprived not only of Roman government but of Roman civilization and culture and having none of their own worth mentioning, the sub-Roman British had lapsed into some sort of collective intellectual coma.

This peculiar notion is seldom directly stated, but everywhere implied. Thus Collingwood, in *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, mourns the descent into the sub-Roman period: "From 455, when the new Easter was accepted by the British Church, we hear of no more cultural and spiritual contacts between Britain and the Mediterranean world. We meet with no more men like Pelagius and Fastidius."<sup>72</sup> Myers, in the same volume, suggests the Saxon migration "had so disorganised the native church as to render it unconscious of ecclesiastical changes on the other side of the channel."<sup>73</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, in *King Arthur's Avalon*, continues the theme: "The British province, abandoned by Rome, stood faltering on the edge of Europe in a somnambulistic independence."<sup>74</sup> More recent historians take the process still further: in the Britain of Gildas' day "Knowledge of the outside world and knowledge of the past had been wiped out of men's minds".<sup>75</sup>

According to E A Thompson, the complete amnesia which afflicted the inhabitants of Britain also partially afflicted the inhabitants of Gaul, selectively erasing from their

<sup>71</sup> verse 90 - from *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. Montague Rhodes James, p252

<sup>72</sup> R G Collingwood and J N L Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p315

<sup>73</sup> R G Collingwood and J N L Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p356

<sup>74</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, p66

<sup>75</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p115



memories all knowledge of British affairs. The evidence is in Constantius' *Life of Germanus*. When dealing with Gaul and Italy, Constantius is a most helpful source for historians, giving the names and titles of the principal players in his drama and a pretty clear idea of the political situation in which they operated. When it comes to Britain he is uninformative in the extreme. For Thompson, there can only be one explanation: "Constantius gives us practically no details about Britain in the saint's time because he knew none." "Neither he nor his readers knew anything at all about the true conditions of southeastern Britain in their own day"<sup>76</sup> So deep was the pall of darkness which now enveloped the British Isles that our nearest neighbour, separated from us by that narrow strip of water, could distinguish nothing in the gloom, and meanwhile our ancestors, oblivious of continental developments, sleepwalked towards the seventh century.

The kiss which awoke the sleeping Celtic races was, naturally, Rome's return. The Easter controversy, according to Nora Chadwick, provoked an outpouring of literature from the previously exclusively oral Celtic Church in defence of its time-honoured customs. But we can hardly expect theological debate from a race only just emerging from trance state, and indeed we don't get it. In Chadwick's view it was only natural that the Celtic writings should be "primarily of a personal character, rather than deeply concerned with theology or religious speculation, for which, indeed, their facilities may have been limited."<sup>77</sup> Their facilities may have been limited! It was the Celtic Church which produced the greatest theologian in early medieval Europe, John Scotus Eriugena, the Dark Age Neoplatonist.

Nations do not suffer from amnesia. The theory is ludicrous, and quite pointless. The evidence for continued communication between Britain and the wider world in these 'dark' centuries is overwhelming. To name but one incontestable proof, excavations at Tintagel unearthed a massive amount of pottery sherds dated to this period, from vessels originating in North Africa, Asia Minor and the Aegean. People don't trade without talking. Which means **the Celtic Church cannot have been ignorant of changes introduced on the Continent, and her failure to conform to them was a matter of choice**. Some historians have observed this. Leslie Alcock in the 1970s pointed out what every archaeologist ought to have known, that the isolation of the Celtic Church was a fantasy.<sup>78</sup> But he did so in *Arthur's Britain*, a book successfully rubbished by David Dumville.

We do know, and we have always known, what divided the Roman and Celtic Churches. The Father of English History, Bede himself, tells us quite plainly. The British were *perfidii*, 'faithless', which is to say, heretics. He even tells us precisely which heresies infected the Celtic Church: The Celtic tonsure was derived from Simon Magus, the first heretic; **the Celtic Easter was Pelagian**.<sup>79</sup> And if the former accusation

<sup>76</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, pp 13 & 85

<sup>77</sup> Nora Chadwick, *The Celts*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981, p210

<sup>78</sup> Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, p134-5

<sup>79</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, V.21 The accusation is elaborately set out in a letter from Abbot Ceolfrid, Bede's own abbot, to Nechtan, king of the Picts, but it is thought the letter was composed by Bede himself.

takes us into the realm of legend, Pelagius is a matter of plain history.

### **Pelagius and Augustine**

Pelagius is a less shadowy figure than most heretics. We know about him both from the attacks of his enemies and from his own writings. He first appears in the historical record around 400 AD, apparently resident in Rome. We know nothing of his early career, though his writings suggest a legal training. He was a deeply compassionate man, an ascetic, possibly a monk.

It is his opponents who tell us he was British - Jerome says Irish, but this was intended as an insult: Jerome pretended to regard the Irish as Strabo once described them, cannibals, despite the peaceful spread of Christianity into Ireland by this time.<sup>80</sup> These enemies also tell us he was a large man: From Orosius: 'a monstrous Goliath', 'bulging forehead', 'broad shoulders and thick neck', 'nourished by baths and banquets', and from Jerome again: 'flanks and strength of an athlete', 'a perfect dullard weighed down with Scottic porridge'. But then Jerome regarded anorexia as a sign of holiness: Once secretary to Pope Damasus he left Rome under a cloud, accused of encouraging one of his aristocratic followers, a grieving widow, to starve herself to death.

That Pelagius was British was a mark against him in the eyes of his opponents. It has been suggested his British name was Morgan, of which the Greek Pelagius is a translation, but the conventional view now is that he must have been born of immigrant stock and not actually a native. He was evidently a large man, but the charge of gluttony can be dismissed, along with that of stupidity. In the earlier part of his career, before Augustine got his teeth into him, Pelagius "was esteemed in Rome as the most polished writer of his day".<sup>81</sup> His theology also has been completely misrepresented. The tag "enemies of Grace", coined in the fifth century, was still a technical term for Pelagians in Bede's period. In our own day the conventional view of Pelagius and the Pelagians has mellowed to: "superficial rationalists who stubbornly and inexplicably resisted the deeper truths of Augustinian theology".<sup>82</sup> But the truth is that Pelagius, for most of the period in which he was active, was not a heretic. He merely restated what had been orthodox Christianity for centuries. It was Augustine's theology which was the innovation.

And that was a truly radical departure. Augustine invented the dogma of Original Sin, as a stain which was ineradicable, and so completely altered the meaning of Christian baptism. Previously, while Gnostics regarded baptism as a mere introduction ceremony - only Gnosis, direct experience of the Divine, freed the soul from ensnarement in this demonic creation - in the orthodox church it was accepted that baptism washed away all stain of sin, giving the new Christian a completely new start, after which he was obliged to remain sinless. Augustine's new concept was that all humanity is hopelessly sunk in sin, that sin enters each individual at the moment of conception, that baptism is a necessary prerequisite of salvation, even for infants, but

<sup>80</sup> see Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p127

<sup>81</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p338

<sup>82</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, p153

that it *did not free the new Christian from sin*. The baptised Christian remained like a sick man, past the crisis but still in need of a physician. Human helplessness is a key element in Augustine's theology. Fallen humanity could do nothing to redeem itself, but was dependent on God's Grace as an infant is dependent on its mother's milk. That Grace is given through the sacraments, but God could grant or withhold it at will. For God had not chosen to save us all: Some people were simply damned by divine decision, predestined for hell.

The Gallic chronicler tells us that in 418 Augustine invented the heresy of predestination. He didn't, of course. This idea of a basic division among humanity was already current in Gnostic groups. For Gnostics, however, the material world was not created by a good God. The sons of light, those who sought salvation, were created by a God outside this fallen realm. They were escaping home. Those who could not achieve salvation could have no desire for it either, for they were the creatures of the evil god of the material world. For Augustine, the world was created by a good God, but one who chose to damn a part of His creation. Augustine's theology was a weird combination of Gnostic and orthodox beliefs. His view of baptism corresponds with the Gnostic view that the new believer was a spiritual infant, in the care of and under the authority of the bishop until ready to receive Gnosis: The Nag Hammadi texts refer to these pre-Gnostic believers as 'the little ones'. His equation of sexuality with sinfulness is likewise Gnostic. Augustine himself was once a member of a Gnostic religion, Manichaeism. His opponents accused him of importing into the Church doctrines absorbed from his earlier faith, and they were quite right.

Elaine Pagels, in *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*,<sup>83</sup> shows Augustine's novel views were derived from a misreading of scripture. His starting point was St. Paul's take on the Genesis story, in Romans 5:12; Sin came into world through one man (Adam) and because of sin, death: thus death came upon all men, *in that* all sinned. Augustine's mistranslation had *in whom* for *in that*, and so made Adam into a corporate personality, within whom we all existed at the beginning, so that Adam's sin, that first act of rebellion against the Divine Will, has stained us all. Humanity, Adam, was created sinless and immortal by a just creator, but by the first act of will lost that perfect state, and with it, free will itself. Free will existed once, in Adam, and then never again. No human since had the capacity to choose the good.

That this idiosyncratic view derived from personal experience is widely accepted, so it is relevant here to take a brief look at Augustine's personal history - a process made easier by the existence of an autobiography, *The Confessions*. As most historians put the most favourable slant they can on Augustine's story, there can be no need for another hagiography here. Augustine was a mother's darling. His people were impoverished gentlefolk from a small North African town, his father a pagan, his mother an orthodox Christian. Augustine was educated in preference to his older brother, which suggests he was conspicuously bright. Education was, for one of his background, the one chance of making a fortune, for it opened up the possibility of high office in the imperial bureaucracy. But Augustine, instead of redeeming the family

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<sup>83</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, p109

fortunes by this route, took a path inimical to social advancement, converting to the suspect Persian cult of the Manichees (as a 'hearer'; he never achieved Gnosis, for which complete sexual self-control was a prerequisite) and uniting himself to a woman of the lower orders, whom he never names.

Legal marriage in this case was impossible. Roman society in this period was divided into two castes, the *honestiores* and the *humiliores*. The latter were subject to legal penalties, such as torture, which in the early empire had been reserved for slaves. Marriage between the two was forbidden in Rome law, but like the nobles of the medieval period, well-bred young Romans would quite commonly take concubine from the lower class, to be discard when the time came for an honourable marriage. But Christian tradition was not at this point identical with Roman practice. In traditional Christian belief the nature of the legal form was not the issue: the issue was fidelity. Christianity allowed a man only one wife, the bond being indissoluble until death, for Christ had said "what God has joined let no man put asunder". Judged from this traditional perspective, at the time of his conversion Augustine was a married man.

History does not say what became of his nameless partner when Augustine dispensed with her services (he kept their son). Augustine plainly didn't think we'd need to know. His *Confessions* relate the more significant business of how he finally saw the error of his ways and was baptised into the orthodox Roman faith under the joint influence of his sainted mother and the great Ambrose of Milan - while the said sainted mother, having got rid of his unsuitable mate, organised a marriage to a prepubescent heiress which, in the end, Augustine didn't go through with. Augustine's conversion, then, was not so much a return to Christ as a return to respectability; to a decent dowry, useful social connections and the possibility of public office - in short, to Rome.

Augustine's relationship, and the ending of it, had a profound influence on his later theology, for it required considerable intellectual sophistry and self-deceit to present a clear breach of Christ's own commands as a righteous return to the true path. But Augustine managed it. He took up with the woman, he later explains, because he was unable to control his lusts. Regrettably his parents had not married him off respectably in his youth, and thus his sinful nature led him to unite himself with a woman of his own choice. As this union was very much against his mother's choice, sex for Augustine was always associated with rebellion against the properly constituted authorities, that is, his mother and his mother's church. But 'choice' is not the word Augustine would have applied to his actions. He was never prepared to take responsibility for the union, but put it down to a weakness outside his own control. This embarrassing lack of control persisted beyond the woman's banishment: Even after he became a celibate, Augustine tells us, he was still subject to night emissions.

That Augustine's peculiar theology derived from this personal experience of helplessness is the generally accepted view. But what is not generally admitted is the role the indulged ego of a mother's favourite played in all this. A profound understanding of the human condition, is how some theologians describe Augustine's perspective. It looks to me more like a profound inability to accept that any

could be spiritually more advanced than he. If the Great Augustine could not control his lusts, then no one else could either, and those who claimed they could must be lying. He was later prepared to believe the ascetic Manichees indulged in orgiastic excess with the poor female dupes lured into their web. Admittedly he never came across any such behaviour during his years as Manichee hearer, but crediting the foulest slander against his erstwhile friends was easier for Augustine than admitting responsibility for his own failings.

But Augustine theology was not merely self-serving. It also served the interests of the Roman state. He was the first Christian authority to offer a theological justification for the use of state force against religious dissidents. Not that the practice began with Augustine - it was, as we have seen, something the Christian Roman Empire inherited from its pagan past - but before Augustine the orthodox Christian view was that argument alone was permissible to persuade recalcitrant Christians to return to the true path. As John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople in the last years of the fourth century, stated explicitly, salvation by coercion was impossible, "God rewards those who abstain from evil out of their own choice, and not out of necessity". The same attitude inspired St Martin of Tours, who in the same period strove to prevent the criminal trial of the Spanish Gnostic Priscillian degenerating into bloodshed, with little success. Augustine at first agreed with this conventional view, but later came to appreciate the value of state force when as Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, he was confronted with recalcitrant heretics in his own dominion.

It was in dispute with the Donatists that Augustine developed his peculiar theology. The origins of this division in the African Church lie in the Diocletian persecution. This was not as bloody as later Christian propaganda pretended. Christians could generally save themselves from slaughter by giving up their sacred texts to the authorities to be burned. One church dignitary who did precisely that was later elected bishop of Carthage, to the disgust of many of his flock, who, being made of sterner stuff, refused to commune with such a weathercock and declared the sacraments he administered, including the ordination of his successor, to be void. They were called Donatists by the Catholic faction, following the time-honoured practice of labelling any view defined as heretical after its most prominent spokesmen, in this case Bishop Donatus of Casae Nigrae. The Donatists described themselves as "the Church of the Martyrs", and their mentality was certainly pre-Constantinian. They are sometimes portrayed as unforgiving zealots for their exclusion of lapsed Christians, but in fact they did readmit the repentant, after re-baptism. What the Donatists really objected to was the increasing accommodation of the Church to the Roman state, which they had not ceased to regard as their natural enemy. "What has the Emperor to do with the Church?" was Donatus' rhetorical question. In their view imperial favour was corrupting the Church; baptism, even ecclesiastical office, were being conferred on people who had no genuine commitment to Christianity.

Augustine's doctrine removed the necessity for such personal commitment. It is Grace which saves, and Grace has nothing to do with the personal conduct of the sinner. It is the unbroken succession from Christ, through the twelve Apostles, which

gives the priesthood of the Roman Church a monopoly on Grace. Salvation depends on access to the sacraments, which comes from membership of the true Church. Being stained by Adam's sin like the rest of us - a sin Augustine thought was passed on in the semen - the priests and bishops who administer the sacraments need not be, indeed could not be, perfect. But this was no disqualification for their being the conduits of God's grace. A bishop derived his authority and his Grace-giving powers from his ordination, not from the purity of his life, and his flock could never have the right to cede from his authority, no matter how reprehensible his conduct. The Donatists were not convinced, and so Augustine called on the forces of the state to settle the debate in his favour. The policy was, by his own lights, a success, but he lived to see it undone by the Vandal conquest of North Africa: The Vandals, of course, were Arians.

But that lay in the future. In the 410s, in the immediate aftermath of Alaric's sack of Rome, the province of North Africa appeared the most stable and authoritarian region in the empire. Augustine's theology played a vital role in that stability, as the local authorities clearly understood. It was Count Marcellinus, the local Imperial Commissioner, who first drew Augustine's attention to the Pelagian 'heresy', having become alarmed by the preaching of Pelagius' rather forthright disciple, Caelestius, who denied the efficacy of infant baptism. Augustine, recognising a new threat to his new theology, sprang into action.

Pelagius was a far more diplomatic writer than his young comrade Caelestius, and unlike Augustine he had no natural appetite for confrontation. But he found himself forced into an intellectual defence of the traditional Christian concept of free will and the natural goodness of God's creation, humanity included. His arguments were clever: Augustine accused him of craftiness. But the truth is Pelagius' aim was to convince, not to scandalise, his orthodox Roman audience. It was no part of his objective to have his necessary reforms dismissed as heresy.

His opponents deliberately misrepresented his views, as indeed they still do. Enemies of Grace became a useful shorthand denunciation, though Pelagius never denied the reality of God's Grace which, he held, would always assist human effort. But he did insist that Christians have the ability, and therefore the duty, to choose the good and abstain from evil, to attain moral perfection by their own efforts. What was absolutely plain to Pelagius, though it seems to have escaped his modern critics, is that Augustine's theology, since it denied the human capacity for self-perfection, relieved those who called themselves Christians from any obligation to attempt it.

This is the crux of the matter. The acceptance of Augustine's theology by the Church would have profound social and political consequences. Christianity had traditionally been on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Pelagius was a traditionalist: his condemnation of wealth as unchristian goes all the way back to the Sermon on the Mount. In a Church which was increasingly accommodating itself to the social realities of the Roman Empire, the Pelagians still took literally Christ's command to the rich man to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Their theology challenged Christians not only to remedy their personal failings but to confront the institutionalised wickedness

of the society they lived in. Augustine's theology not only allowed the wealthy to keep their wealth, it allowed the Roman state, now calling itself Christian, to continue the same brutally repressive, socially unjust and morally bankrupt organisation it had been in its pagan heyday. It is hardly surprising that the Roman authorities preferred the theology of Augustine. And it was the political authorities, not the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which finally declared Pelagius a heretic.

The process took some years. Augustine began his pamphlet war in 412, after Caelestius' visit to North Africa. In 415 his proxy, Orosius, followed Pelagius to the Holy Land, where, in conjunction with Jerome, he tried and failed to get him condemned first by the patriarch of Jerusalem and then by an eastern church council held at Diospolis. Pelagius was completely exonerated, which is not altogether surprising since Augustine's eccentric theology depended ultimately on a mistranslation of a Greek text. Augustine, however, would not accept that Pelagius had won the theological argument. The debate had been unfair because Pelagius, a brilliant speaker in Latin, was also perfectly fluent in Greek while Augustine's spokesman had had to rely on a translator, who obviously wasn't up to the job!<sup>84</sup> Two African synods furiously condemned the easterners' decision - hardly a significant victory since the Roman Church was only one half of the Christian community in Africa (the Donatist Church, despite repression, still had an equal number of adherents), and under the control of Augustine's coterie, graduates of his monastic seminary. These were men with a keen sense of the needs of authority - some of them had been secret policemen before their conversion.

Thwarted by the Greek east, Augustine's obvious response was to appeal to the highest authorities in the Latin-speaking world. He addressed his next denunciation to Pope Innocent I, pointing out, not that Pelagius' theology went against traditional Christian teaching - it did not - but that it "cut at the roots of Episcopal authority".<sup>85</sup> He had some success with Innocent, rather less with his successor, Zosimus, who succeeded to the papacy in March 417. But Augustine's appeals did not stop at the ecclesiastical authorities. He also addressed himself to the Emperor and the imperial court, including among his arguments a bribe of eighty Numidian stallions, fattened on the estates of a church which did not shun wealth, and delivered to Italy by Alypius, bishop of the African city of Thagaste and Augustine's very close friend.

So, the victory went to Augustine on the decision of the civil authorities. On the 30th April 418 the western emperor, Honorius, declared Pelagius' teachings heretical and condemned intransigent adherents to deportation and the confiscation of all their goods - not on religious but on political grounds: The Pelagians were held responsible for an outbreak of civil unrest in the city of Rome.

We can't say Honorius' government was mistaken in its judgement. The Pelagians, being egalitarians, were hardly the most ardent supporters of the Roman system. We have an entertaining illustration from the pen of a Pelagian layman, apparently a Briton, writing from Sicily in the early fifth century: "Inequality of wealth" he states "is not to be blamed upon the graciousness of God, but upon the iniquity of men." On that

<sup>84</sup> see John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p 409-10

<sup>85</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, p125

count, the Roman system itself would have to be the work of the devil. The same writer mocks attempts to side-step Christ's statement that it is harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Apologists for wealth were arguing that although this statement made it appear impossible for the rich to enter heaven, actually it was a mistranslation, the camel referred to was not the beast of burden but a type of ship's rope, to which the Sicilian Briton scathingly replies: "Of course it is 'possible' for Him to let the rich into heaven, 'possible' to let them bring all their estates and their mobile property and their wealth into heaven too, and their camels with them into the bargain. If it were just a matter of 'possibility', no one would be shut out of heaven, for everything is possible to God."<sup>86</sup>

Whether or not the Pelagians ever preached armed resistance to the Roman state, clearly their theology was inimical to the Empire. The Empire determined to crush them. But in the Gallic prefecture this proved to be no easy matter. The imperial measures met with resistance at every stage. The Pelagians themselves continued for many years to demand a proper hearing, bishops refused to accept the papal condemnation, Gallic writers frankly denounced Augustine's heresies. Even when the battle to rehabilitate Pelagius was clearly lost, orthodox western churchmen continued to uphold his teachings. Gallic theology remained semi-Pelagian throughout the fifth century. It was not until the Council of Orange in 529 that Augustinianism finally won the day, and became indisputably the orthodox theology of the orthodox Church.<sup>87</sup> By that time Britain had been outside the Empire for over a century.

It took all the powers of the Roman state to enforce Augustinian theology on the Continent. In Britain, where no such force was available, the Pelagians were defeated by the preaching of missionaries - or so Rome's partisans would have us believe. Some historians do believe them though it's hard to see why; their stories simply don't add up. Prosper of Aquitaine tells us Germanus' first mission in 429 was an unqualified success, yet there was a second mission only a few years later. Palladius, first bishop to the Irish, also succeeded in returning Britain to the Catholic faith, as well as converting the Irish to Christianity. No historian credits the second claim, so there would seem to be no sense in crediting the first. Constantius of Lyon records two successful missions by Germanus, whose miracles persuaded the British plebs to turn against the Pelagians - who, surprisingly, came forth in dazzling robes, flaunting their wealth. Historians aren't usually prepared to credit miracles, yet some accept the defeat of the British Pelagians, despite the absence of corroborating detail in Constantius' account. Professor Thompson is persuaded that Constantius' failure to provide any political information on Independent Britain, to tell us who ruled the country or any part of it he visited, to name a single bishop who either opposed or assisted Germanus' mission, can be explained by the total eclipse of British affairs in the minds of continental writers. It can't. There is no possible reason why selective amnesia should have struck down Constantius' informants. He tells us nothing of the political life of Britain because what he knows adds nothing to his case.

But he does provide us with one valuable piece of information. During his first visit

<sup>86</sup> *De Divitiis* (On Wealth) John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, pp 340-1

<sup>87</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, p125



Germanus performed a very strange ceremony at the tomb of Britain's most famous martyr, St Alban. Germanus had the tomb opened, and placed within it "relics of all the apostles and of various martyrs... since... the saints... of different countries... were of equal merit in heaven."<sup>88</sup> This act is so unusual that Constantius himself refers to it as a 'pious sacrilege'. What possible motive could there be for it? Why would Germanus would Germanus seek to turn the shrine of St. Alban into the shrine of All Saints, unless St. Alban was regarded as the national saint of a nationalist British Church, a church which, like the Donatists of North Africa, saw itself as a pre-Roman Church of the Martyrs?

### **Colman's Defence**

The Celtic Church was Pelagian. It is hard to see how there could ever be any doubt about the matter, when this is clearly stated by the Roman authorities themselves, the very arbiters of heresy, and when we have still in the written record around seventy Pelagian works preserved in the teeth of Roman opposition (not by hiding them in desert conditions, but by the simple expedient of attributing them to orthodox authors, even to Augustine and Jerome).<sup>89</sup> Between the theology of the Sicilian Briton and the generous poverty of Bede's Aedan there is an obvious continuity. Yet historians would have it that the Celtic Church was impeccably orthodox, a branch of *the* Church which had inexplicably lost communication with the main trunk. The only grounds I can discover for this strange conceit are that there is no record of the Celtic churchmen attempting to defend Pelagian doctrines against Rome's assaults.

Historians are not theologians. They have entirely missed the argument. From the Roman perspective all defence of Pelagius was already ruled out of court. Pelagius had been condemned; whether rightly or wrongly was no longer the question, the deed was done. As Pope John IV reminded the Irish ecclesiastics, "not only has it (Pelagianism) been suppressed these two hundred years, but it is daily laid under the ban of our perpetual anathema."<sup>90</sup> Rome clearly had no intention of reopening the debate.

And from the Celts' point of view? Pelagius wasn't the point there either. The question has been confused by over-reliance on Roman terminology. All heresies, under the Roman system of nomenclature, were to be labelled from their most prominent spokesman at the time of their condemnation. But that does not mean a particular heretical view originated in that period or with that named heretic. Indeed, what Rome came to define as heresies had generally started life as standard Christian beliefs. Even pro-orthodox historians are obliged to acknowledge this fact: Robin Lane Fox admits Paul of Antioch was "interrogated for views which would probably have passed muster a century earlier. By the fourth century, the views of some of his opponents themselves seemed embarrassingly unorthodox."<sup>91</sup> Indeed one of the greatest of the early Church fathers, Origen, was in time accused of having

<sup>88</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p344

<sup>89</sup> John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 3, p121; Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p139

<sup>90</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.19

<sup>91</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p561

“adulterated the purity of the true faith with the poison of pagan culture”.<sup>92</sup> “The drift”, Lane Fox explains, “was not in Origen’s direction.”<sup>93</sup>

This ‘drift’ is not something the Church herself has been prepared to admit to. Instead the official version of Church history has always projected orthodox dogmas back in time, declaring them to be what the Church held to from the beginning, in contrast to the multitude of heresies, all of which are temporal eruptions of limited duration (though some might perennially revive). This stance is at times maintained in the teeth of the most obvious facts, as in the case of the Ebionites.

The word is from *Ebionim*, ‘the poor’, a term by which the earliest Jewish Christians - and the Dead Sea scrolls community - referred to themselves. This earliest Jewish Church did not die out, as was once supposed, in the Roman sack of Jerusalem. It had already left Judea under the leadership of Simeon son of Cleophas, Jesus’ cousin. It survived as the sects of the Nazoreans and the Ebionites, defined as heresies by orthodox Christian writers on the grounds that they held Christ to have been born a man, not the incarnate Son of God. So far did orthodoxy disguise their true origins that by the early third century Tertullian could claim their founder was a man named Ebion, and later heresy-hunters even quoted from Ebion’s writings.<sup>94</sup>

The Celtic Church was not founded by Pelagius. There is no evidence that he ever preached in Britain, though John Morris points out that not only Pelagius himself but “all the known leaders of the radicals in Rome came from the British Isles.”<sup>95</sup> Roman nomenclature shouldn’t cause us to look at this the wrong way up. **It was the British Church which produced Pelagius, not vice-versa. The Christianity of these islands became Pelagian, in Roman perspective, when it refused to accept the new theology of Augustine.** From its own perspective it was retaining the Christian message as it had originally received it, and that argument is preserved in the surviving written record. We have it from Bede.

Bede is still a highly respected historian commended for his judicious use of his sources, and the synod of Whitby occurred on his home ground, within the lifetime of his tutors and informants. In Bede’s report of Colman’s defence of his Church’s deviant practices, delivered at that synod, we have what can only be, in the circumstances, the official position of the Celtic Church. What Colman said was that his tradition was fully apostolic, and therefore it could not be condemned. It originated with John the Evangelist, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

John is associated above all the disciples with the Christian mystical tradition. His is the most Gnostic of Gospels, the one used by the Cathars in their *Consolamentum*. Medieval mystics within the Roman Church, disciples of Joachim of Fiore, expected a Church of John would arise to supersede the Church of Peter in the coming Era of the Holy Spirit. So it is not surprising that some writers have read more into Colman’s reply than appears on the surface. Geoffrey Ashe describes it as cryptic, and suggests

<sup>92</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p184

<sup>93</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p561

<sup>94</sup> see Robert Eisenman & Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, p233, Hugh J Schonfield, *The Pentecost Revolution*, p235 & 289, Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p23

<sup>95</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p339

that the Celts were hiding something, and that Rome knew it. This alone, he feels, would explain the 'obscure vehemence' of the Roman party.<sup>96</sup> But the truth is, the brevity is Bede's.

Bede admits he is not reporting all he knows of Colman's speech - "When he had concluded these and similar arguments..."<sup>97</sup> - and it is hardly to be expected that a Roman partisan would expand on the case for the Celtic defence. In fact Bede's account is exactly what we should expect. He presents the arguments in such a way as to make the outcome appear inevitable: Colman, invited to open the debate, lays down his Johannine claim. Wilfrid, for the prosecution, easily trumps the Beloved Disciple with Peter, leader of the Twelve, the rock on whom Christ build his Church and to whom he gave the keys of heaven and hell. What other decision could King Oswy have reached? But if the Celtic argument were really as weak as Bede makes out, Colman surely would not have made it.

Colman could not deny the claims Wilfrid made for Peter. These were fully scriptural, as King Oswy, Bede tells us, obliged Colman to confirm. So he has to have denied the Roman deduction from it. The Roman Church claimed dominion over all other Christian churches, the Celtic included, on the grounds that she had inherited the authority of Peter, leader of the twelve Apostles from whom all priestly power flowed, because she had been founded by the Prince of the Apostles. Logically Colman's defence of the Celtic Church must have involved a refutation of this Petrine claim. This may sound improbable, the Petrine claim has been so long repeated it has been made to appear a fact. But it is actually a relatively late Church legend.

### **The Petrine Claim**

Surprisingly, even Rome's own scriptures do not support her in this. Academic study of the New Testament texts, particularly of Paul's epistles and the Acts of the Apostles, and of the writings of the early Church historians has demonstrated conclusively that this picture was a later fabrication.

To begin with, Peter was not the head of Church. The leader of the Christian community after the crucifixion was James the Just, Jesus' brother. This is confirmed by the letters of St. Paul, a contemporary source. And it is a reputable church historian, Hegesippus, who tells us that James was succeeded by his cousin Simeon.

Peter was never the bishop of Rome. Historians now accept that the office of bishop did not come into being during the lifetime of the Apostles, and indeed no one seems to be able to work out how it did arise. There was an equivalent post in the Dead Sea community, that of the Mebakker, but historians do not universally accept that the Jewish office of Mebakker gave rise to the Christian bishop. In any case it is plain from Paul's letters that there was no such office in the communities he founded. Lane Fox says that as late as 170 AD there is no sign of bishops in the churches of southern Gaul. However, a letter from a Christian in Rome was already claiming in the 90s that the Apostles had appointed bishops, so the Roman Church would seem to have been one of the first to establish the office. According to Eusebius, "the father of

<sup>96</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, p124-5

<sup>97</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.25

ecclesiastical history - the first, the only historian of the Church bordering on primitive times",<sup>98</sup> the first bishop of Rome was Linus, the same Linus who is mentioned at the end of St. Paul's letter to Timothy. But if Linus was of Paul's party then the first bishop of Rome had nothing to do with Peter.

The claim that the Church of Rome was founded by Peter is at best a half-truth. We do not know for sure that Peter ever went to Rome. Though tradition insists he died there, a martyr, the kind of evidence historians usually insist on is not available in this case - there is certainly no contemporary documentation of the event. But the tale is credible. Eusebius recounts that Peter travelled to Rome to confront the first heresiarch, Simon Magus. And there is an historical reality which may underlie this story. We learn from Paul's letters and from Acts that after his arrest in Jerusalem, Paul was sent to Rome for trial, and that he continued, in chains, to preach his version of the Gospel. It was not the same version as that taught by the Jewish Church under James. That Paul was opposed by the Jerusalem Church is something he frankly tells us, in his own letters. It is possible Peter was sent to Rome to counter Paul's influence, and that the legendary confrontation between Peter and Simon Magus may recall an actual confrontation between Peter and Paul, though in the earliest forms of the legend it is at Antioch that St. Peter defeats Simon Magus.<sup>99</sup>

Peter and Paul were remembered in later tradition as Rome's joint martyrs whose blood sanctified the capital of the Empire; Christian replacements for Romulus and Remus, as one pope<sup>100</sup> frankly stated. Initially, in this dual kingship, Paul was given equal honours with Peter, as in Irenaeus demand for all churches to submit to the Church of Rome, "the very great, the very ancient, and universally known church founded and organised at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul... For it is necessary that every church should agree with this church, on account of its pre-eminent authority."<sup>101</sup> But Irenaeus, writing around 180 AD, is not at this stage affirming contemporary doctrine but advancing a claim, and one which we know met resistance, especially in the Greek-speaking east. The Christian churches here were more ancient and longer established than that of Rome, and reluctant to admit her authority. Antioch advanced a rival claim that Peter was its first bishop. Other Christian communities also claimed apostolic tradition received from Christ's own immediate followers - from James the Just, from one of the Twelve, from the women of Jesus' party, from 'the Apostle' Paul - lineages which in many cases have a far greater claim to authenticity than Irenaeus' improbable combination of Peter and Paul.

The Roman bishops never did achieve dominion over the Eastern churches. The patriarch of Constantinople, the new Rome, ultimately became the head of the Greek Church, after a stiff struggle with the more ancient sees of Alexandria and Antioch. As Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the empire, so its organisational

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<sup>98</sup> "Such did *The History of the Church* and its author appear to the editor of the Bohn Eusebius, published nearly a century ago: and present-day readers of the book are not likely to dispute his opinion." *Eusebius, The History of the Church*, G A Williamson, Introduction, p7

<sup>99</sup> G R S Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, p165

<sup>100</sup> Leo the Great, in a sermon delivered on their feast day, 29th June, in 441.

<sup>101</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3:3:2 - see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p24

structure came to mirror that of the state.

The Petrine legend justified a development which had nothing to do with the historical Simon Peter. As for the Petrine text itself, which Wilfrid wielded to such effect at Whitby, while the words are a direct quotation from the Gospels the Papal interpretation is nothing like so old. Its first recorded use is by Stephen, bishop of Rome from 254-6, during a debate with Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, whom Stephen denounced as Antichrist. It was not seriously advanced until Pope Damasus,<sup>102</sup> who came to office in 366 after riots between his followers and those of his rival had bloodied the streets of Rome - the same Damasus who first adopted the title Pontifex Maximus, borne originally by the high priests of ancient Rome. Wilfrid's interpretation of the Petrine text effectively dates only to the last half of the fourth century, that is, only decades before Britain left the empire.

Colman's claim, that the Celts were justified in retaining their own customs as these too were Apostolic, is not mysterious or cryptic. It would have been perfectly acceptable to all the churches of the first two centuries. At the end of the second century even Irenaeus, arch heresy-hunter and Roman partisan though he was, was appalled when the bishop of Rome, Victor, tried to enforce the Roman Easter on the churches of Asia Minor.

It has often been remarked that the Celtic Church was 'old fashioned'. It was far more old fashioned than is now generally credited. But if historians now fail to understand the theological implications of the Johannine claim, we can be very sure the Roman Church at the time understood perfectly. The evidence, once again, comes from Bede.

### **The Lucius Legend**

Bede's *History of the English Church and People* contains an alternative, Roman version of the origins of the British Church. The story has a fine cast of characters, but St. John is not among them. "In the year of our Lord's Incarnation 156 Marcus Antoninus Verus, fourteenth from Augustus, became Emperor jointly with his brother Aurelius Commodus. During their reign and while the holy Eleutherus ruled the Roman Church, Lucius, a British king, sent him a letter, asking to be made a Christian by his direction. This pious request was quickly granted, and the Britons received the Faith and held it peacefully in all its purity and fullness until the time of the Emperor Diocletian."<sup>103</sup>

There is a reason for every statement in every text, as John Morris reminds us. It has been suggested this story is a mistake arising from linguistic confusion between the province of Britannia and Britium, a fortress in Edessa. There is no mistake. This story is a deliberate concoction with a precise political purpose in view.

Its source is Eusebius' *History of the Church*. All the names can found there. Marcus Antoninus Verus is more commonly known as Marcus Aurelius, Emperor from 161 to 180, who began ruling jointly with his adoptive brother Lucius Verus and, after 177, with own son, Lucius Aurelius Commodus. Pope Eleutherus brings up the rear in

<sup>102</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, pp 120 & 237-8

<sup>103</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, I.4

Eusebius' list of the first twelve bishops of Rome, succeeding to office in "the seventeenth year of the Emperor Antoninus Verus",<sup>104</sup> i.e. 177.

Whoever invented the legend was careful to blend enough history into it to make it credible, and to harmonise it with existing Roman tradition. Tertullian, writing at the beginning of the third century says "the regions of Britain which have never been penetrated by the Roman Arms have received the religion of Christ", and Origen, a little later, states more than once that Christianity had reached Britain. The Lucius tale of the first Christian mission places it at the end of the second century. Any later would have contradicted the writings of these Church Fathers.

It is not difficult to determine what function this story served in Bede's history. The mention of Diocletian is the key to the whole matter, for it is with this name that Gildas also rounds off his story of the first British mission: "Christ's precepts were received by the inhabitants without enthusiasm; but they remained, more or less pure, right up till the nine year persecution by the tyrant Diocletian."<sup>105</sup> But Gildas dates that mission, not to the late second century, but to the time of Tiberius.

Bede was very careful in his use of sources, and Gildas was his prime source for the first part of his history. Though he supplements Gildas' account with other sources, and leaves out much of the rhetoric, Gildas is always his pattern. He begins like Gildas with a description of the island of Britain, starts his historical account, like Gildas, with the Roman conquest, and like Gildas relates the coming of Christianity immediately after Boudicca's rebellion, neither writer mentioning the queen by name. In both, an account of the first Christian mission is followed by the statement that the British kept the faith pure until the time of Diocletian. At this point Bede inserts an account of the Emperor Severus' activities in Britain, including the building of an earthwork separating the province from the unconquered barbarians of the north, before returning to Diocletian, in whose reign, following Gildas, he wrongly places the martyrdom of Alban. (In fact there was no Christian persecution in Britain in this period, for Constantine the Great's father, the Caesar Constantius Chlorus, never enforced that policy).

And so Bede continues right up to Badon, often following Gildas almost word for word, including information derived from more reliable historical sources but always adapting it to fit with Gildas' account. Even where Gildas is plain wrong, where Bede ought to have realised he was wrong, Bede follows Gildas. His account of the building of the two walls across Britain is most revealing. Bede, after Gildas, dates their construction to the fifth century, immediately before the Roman Withdrawal, though he plainly knows of a better tradition. Neither Hadrian's Wall nor the Antonine earthwork are now credited to Severus, but he is, at least, a second-century emperor, and the walls were built in that century, for the purpose Bede states, to separate the conquered from the unconquered Britons. But, says Bede, "He (Severus) did this not with a wall, as some imagine, but with an earthwork".<sup>106</sup> So contemporaries knew Hadrian's wall was built in the second century, but Bede is constrained to deny this. In

<sup>104</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 5.1

<sup>105</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 8, 9:1

<sup>106</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, 1.5

order to fit in with Gildas' narrative and since, as all could observe, there are only two walls, Bede has to insist that no stone wall was built until the time of the Roman Withdrawal, and the one built then was constructed along the same line as Severus' earlier earthwork which was thus no longer visible. To such lengths is Bede prepared to go in order to support Gildas.

The coming of Christianity to Britain in the reign of Tiberius is the one incident in Gildas' text which Bede is prepared to contradict. There has to be a very good reason for this, and that reason is not far to seek. Bede is out to prove that the British Church owed obedience to the Roman. Rome claimed that all Christian churches were under her authority, as she was founded by Peter, whom Christ had made his vicar on earth. In addition, all the western churches were founded directly from Rome, and so owed obedience to their Mother Church. Church historians today admit this claim is untrue.<sup>107</sup> The Celtic Church in the eighth century also denied it. And Gildas' sermon supported their claim.

The Emperor Tiberius ruled between 14 and 37 AD. The martyrdom of Peter and Paul, whose blood sanctified the capital of the empire, occurred in the reign of Nero. Indeed, in Eusebius' history, Peter does not reach Rome until the reign of Claudius, Nero's predecessor. Claudius ruled between 41 and 54 AD, after Tiberius' successor Caligula. Bede's educated contemporaries may not have known the precise dates, but they would be aware of the succession of the Roman emperors. If the British Church was founded in the time of Tiberius, as Gildas claimed, then it obviously predated the foundation of the Roman Church. Then the Celtic Church clearly was not a daughter Church of Rome.

It is beside the point that neither of these accounts has any historical validity. The fact is that we can clearly see how and why Bede's story of the first Christian mission to Britain was manufactured. King Lucius is not a mistaken or romanticised history, it is political propaganda. The fact that it is couched in the form of a legend should not blind us to the obvious. It has only one possible function, to deny the Celtic Church's claim to an apostolic foundation independent from Rome. Rome knew perfectly well what the Celtic case was, and she answered it with a fabrication of her own. Or to put it another way, she lied.

### **The First British Church**

History is written by the victors, not only because the written record favours their version of events, but also because historians tend to do the same. But it must be acknowledged historians do not always have a completely free choice. Political change is the main determinant in shifting the consensus because those who hold power can, and do, enforce the view they find convenient. The evidence, from the perspective of conquering elites and revolutionary governments, is really not the point.

Bede's version of the foundation of British Christianity was the standard view throughout the Middle Ages. Even when Glastonbury Abbey added the Grail origin

<sup>107</sup> "In actual fact Greek missionaries probably played a part in the evangelisation of North Africa, perhaps also Marseilles and the Rhone valley, and even Northern Italy, not to mention Rome itself." Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p240.

legend to its history, it was not allowed to contradict Bede. An interpolation into William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate Glastoniense Ecclesiae* has the apostle Philip sending his dearest friend Joseph of Arimathea with eleven companions to convert Britain. The mission fails. The twelve are granted Glastonbury Tor, along with twelve hides of land, and there they build the first Christian church on British soil. But they make no converts. The barbarian king and his subjects refuse to change the customs of their ancestors. On the deaths of the twelve saints the land reverts to wilderness, so that the British Church can be founded again, from Rome.

With the reformation, Bede's Lucius legend - and indeed his entire history - was of necessity rejected by the rulers of England. It gave comfort to the enemy. Edwin Jones, in *The English Nation*, points out that the first English translation of the work was made by a Catholic in exile, Thomas Stapleton, in 1565, and reprinted by the Jesuits at St Omer in 1622 and 1626.<sup>108</sup> The official, state enforced, version of English history at this time insisted on the early foundation of the British Church, and not from Rome. In a sermon preached before the House of Commons in praise of the Glorious Revolution, Gilbert Burnet, bishop of Salisbury and chief propagandist for William of Orange, denounced the Roman Church's claims with these words: "We owe no dependence to the See that pretends to be Mother-Church; we received not the Gospel from any sent by them. The Christian Religion was in this Island Several Ages before we had any Commerce with that See".<sup>109</sup>

Today only 'alternative' historians grant any credence to the story of Joseph of Arimathea. Academics may smile, but in point of fact there is nothing in the historical evidence to contradict the tale. Joseph's historical existence is nowhere questioned. He appears in all four Gospels as the man who, after the crucifixion, begged Pilate for the body of Christ and buried it in his own tomb. Legend makes him Christ's uncle, and kinship is logically implied by Pilate's action: The body of a man who had living relatives (as we know Christ had) would not likely be delivered into the hands of a complete stranger.

According to British legend, Joseph was a tin merchant whose business brought him to Britain. This notion was treasured by Cornish miners and London tin-workers long after it had passed out of the official version of history.<sup>110</sup> A belief that on one of his trips here he brought his nephew Jesus, then just a boy, is what lies behind Blake's famous hymn, *Jerusalem*. But Britain really was a source of tin in the ancient world, the trade being long established by the time of Christ. According to the Gospels, Joseph was wealthy, and since no hint is given as to the source of his wealth there is nothing to contradict the legend that he was 'in the tin trade'. Nor can it be thought improbable that a rich man would spend his wealth in spreading the Christian

<sup>108</sup> Edwin Jones, *The English Nation*, p45

<sup>109</sup> see Edwin Jones, *The English Nation*, p73

<sup>110</sup> Henry Jenner supplied this information to the *Western Morning News*, April 6 1933, related to him by a friend of a friend, who claimed to have witnessed this event in a London organ manufacturer's workshop. To make an organ pipe a shovelful of metal had to be thrown, with great skill, along a table on which a linen cloth was stretched. As each man threw his shovelful, he repeated this phrase as a charm: 'Joseph was in the tin trade' - see Lionel Smithett Lewis, *St Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury*, Appendix 7



message far from his homeland and among foreign nations, when exactly that is recorded of St. Paul.

Or Joseph could have come to Britain as a refugee. He obviously had reason to be nervous, despite his wealth. John's Gospel tells us that up to the crucifixion he was a secret disciple "for fear of the Jews". And the Romans were equally dangerous, especially to a relative of Christ. The official version of the crucifixion presents us with a conscience-struck Pilate, badgered by a Jewish mob into killing Christ. This is nonsense. Crucifixion was a Roman death, a public torture intended to intimidate other enemies of the state into submission. The custom was that the victim's crime would be nailed above his head: in the case of Christ, the crime was 'King of the Jews'. That is, his crime was genetic. All Christ's relatives were under threat, and some, we know, were subsequently executed.<sup>111</sup> If one of those relatives had a trade link with Britain, then still an independent region on the fringes of the Empire, this would be an obvious place of refuge.

The story is not ridiculous but it is just a legend. Yet so is every account of the origins of the British Church, except for that one clear statement in Bede's text, that at Whitby the Celtic Christians claimed their tradition originated with St. John.

The Roman Church ceased to be a threat to the English establishment long before the Celtic fringe ceased to be a nuisance. Bede has now been firmly reinstated as the father of English history and the Roman foundation of British Christianity is once again the orthodox view. Of course no reputable historian actually credits the Lucius legend, nor subscribes to the view that the Roman Empire was God's instrument for spreading the Christian message through the world. But historians do still accept that Christianity arrived in Britain because of the Empire, and that it spread first through the towns, and among the most Romanised sections of the population. Indeed the consensus view is that there were few Christians in Britain before the conversion of Constantine, despite the existence of the British martyrs, and despite the fact that there were British bishops at the synod of Council of Arles in 314 - indicating an established British hierarchy at that early date - and notwithstanding the statements of Tertullian and Origen that Christianity had already reached Britain in their day, and indeed had penetrated to regions Rome had not conquered. For today's historians are not bound to respect the opinions of Church Fathers. Tertullian and Origen, they hold, were just exaggerating, for effect.

History is usually written from the written record, but in the case of the British Church, archaeological evidence seems to weigh the heavier. That there is so little trace in the archaeological record is evidence that Christianity must have been scarcely extant in Roman Britain before the fourth century, when its adoption as the Roman state religion made conversion attractive to the politically ambitious.

But politically motivated converts are precisely the kind to whom Augustine's theology could be expected to appeal, Christians who were lukewarm in their

<sup>111</sup> His brother James and his cousin Simeon. Indeed, Eusebius tells us the Emperor Vespasian and his son Domitian set out to exterminate the entire Davidic line, though Jesus' great-nephews were spared by Domitian as their obvious poverty proved they were no political threat. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 2:23, 3:12, 3:19-20, 3:32

Christianity but strong in their support for the Roman state. Yet so far from receiving the new theology with open arms, the British Church rejected it absolutely, and despite Rome's vigorous opposition held solidly to the traditional Christianity Pelagius espoused. We even have contemporary evidence that the fifth-century British Church regarded itself as a pre-Roman Church of the Martyrs.

Evidence is not always the main factor in determining the consensus view. The late foundation of the British Church is a necessary part of the 'perfectly orthodox' theory of the Celtic Church. If Christianity arrived late in Britain it can be more readily assumed to have been the perfectly normal late imperial variety, whereas if it were early, it could have been very different from anything we now think of as Christianity.

## Chapter 8

### The Church and the Heretics

*What else, then, is all history, but the praise of Rome?*

*Petrarch, 14th century*

#### **Priscillian's Heresy**

Historians now accept that Rome brought Christianity to Britain. This view is not regarded as in any way mythological, since it concedes no letters between a Roman pope and a British king, and names no missionaries. The picture now is of the spread of a faith originating in the east of the empire eventually reaching the far west through the normal processes of human interaction which the Pax Romana facilitated: trade, the transference of officials and army personnel, the relocation of slaves, etc. Finally, in the early fourth century, the Emperor himself converted, and Christianity was made the religion of the Empire and actively promoted by the state. Then British Christianity began in earnest. But this was the normal Christianity of the late Empire, in no way separate from the Christianity of, say, nearby Gaul. British bishops attended fourth-century councils. Celtic monasticism was rooted in the Gallic monasticism of St. Martin. And when Martin's biographer, Sulpicius Severus, writing in 400-3, refers to a controversy raging *inter nos* 'among us', it is accepted he means the entire church of the Gallic prefecture, Britain included.

The controversy was over the execution of Priscillian, a drama which began in the 370s. Priscillian was then a layman, an educated nobleman from the Spanish province of Galicia who founded an ascetic movement promoting a more intense commitment to Christianity, encouraging lay Christians of both sexes to vegetarianism, sexual abstinence, religious retreats and the study of apocryphal texts. These activities aroused the suspicions of Hyginus and Hydatius, bishops of Cordova and Merida respectively, who referred the matter to Pope Damasus. He ordered the Spanish bishops to meet in synod to examine the issue, so that no one should be condemned without a hearing. They met at Saragossa, in 380, and outlawed certain practices of the Priscillianists: women were forbidden to associate with men in times of prayer, no one was to fast on a Sunday, no one was to absent himself from church in Lent or Epiphany to pray alone at home or in the mountains, and clerics were not to become monks on the pretext that the life of the religious was more perfect than the life of the secular clergy.<sup>112</sup>

But the movement had supporters among the Spanish church hierarchy: Bishops Instantius and Salvian reacted to Saragossa by consecrating Priscillian bishop of Avila. Hydatius appealed to the emperor Gratian, and Priscillian was stripped of his bishopric. When Priscillian and some of his followers journeyed to Italy to plead their

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<sup>112</sup> see Stephen McKenna, *Paganism and Pagan Survivals in Spain up to the Fall of the Visigothic Kingdom 3 - Priscillianism and Pagan Survivals in Spain*, The Library of Iberian Resources Online

own case both Pope Damasus and St. Ambrose refused to see them, but the Master of Offices reinstated Priscillian and condemned his accusers as disturbers of the peace.

But then Gratian's regime was overthrown by Maximus. Priscillian's enemies tried again, accusing him of being a Manichee, and of practising black magic - the two charges tended to go together. In a misguided attempt to clear his name from the bishops' slander, Priscillian himself appealed to Maximus for judgement, and Maximus, who had justified his own usurpation on the grounds his predecessor had failed to defend the true faith, converted the charge to a criminal one, to be heard in a secular court where far more severe penalties would apply. The penalty for Manichaeism was confiscation of goods. The charge of *maleficaria*, sorcery, carried the death penalty, as it had under the pagan empire. Priscillian was tortured and executed at Trier around 385, despite everything St. Martin could do to save him

But what was his crime? It is clear he was not actually a Manichee. Indeed Priscillian himself was so far from understanding his situation that he sought to defend himself from this charge by insisting that he had always believed and taught that Christ was God: To a genuine Manichee Christ was a mortal prophet, like Zoroaster, the Buddha, and indeed Mani himself, who died in a Persian prison in 277. But it had become the normal practice of the Roman Church, from at least the time of Eusebius, to designate all Gnostics as Manichaeans. The seventh book of Eusebius' history begins with the accession of Gallus in 251, and claims that in that time: "the maniac whose name reflected his demon-inspired heresy... a barbarian in mode of life, as his speech and manners showed... tried to pose as Christ. Bringing together false and blasphemous doctrines from the innumerable long-extinct blasphemous heresies, he made a patchwork of them, and brought from Persia a deadly poison with which he infected our own world. From him came the unholy name of Manichee, which is still in common use. Such is the basis of this Knowledge falsely so called, which grew up at the period mentioned"<sup>113</sup> The purpose of this misidentification is clear, the Gnostic claim to a root in the earliest Christian period was denied, and they were branded followers of a Persian sect originating outside the sacred Roman empire, and thus utterly alien. There are Catholic writers who still persist in this practice: Steven Runciman titles his 1947 work on the Cathars *The Medieval Manichees*. The few remaining Cathar texts which survived the Church's attempt at extirpation prove that they were, in fact, Christians. So was Priscillian. Nor do we have any reason to believe him guilty of sorcery. That was simply a standard charge levelled against all Gnostics. The charge against Priscillian was, then, the heresy of Gnosticism.

Some historians doubt that Priscillian was actually a Gnostic on the grounds that he didn't regard the devil as coeval with God but as a created being who could, like ourselves, achieve salvation - Origen had once said the same. But he did have a dualistic view of matter, regarding the material world as a trap in which souls were snared. Pope Leo, Augustine and Orosius - who had himself been a follower of

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<sup>113</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 7:31

Priscillian - claim that he held the soul to be a fragment of the divine imprisoned in the flesh, and that the stars had a role in that imprisonment. The body was formed from the twelve astrological signs, Aries the head, Gemini the arms, and so forth, but the corresponding portions of the soul were from the twelve patriarchs. Salvation lay in breaking the bond which imprisoned the divine creation in the material, a bond which Christ had loosened by his passion and affixed to the Cross. Even more startling, among the apocryphal texts used by the Priscillianists was one which held that God produced rain by showing a Virgin of Light to the Prince of Wetness, who is so aroused by desire that his sweat produces rain and his groans thunder.

The teachings of Priscillian would not seem to equate to what we now think of as Christianity. Yet his Christianity was normal enough in the Spain of his day for Priscillian to be consecrated a bishop. And he himself, insisting on his own orthodoxy throughout his trials and tribulations, was apparently unaware of how deviant his theology must appear in the eyes of the orthodox, and thus oblivious of the risks he ran in giving himself into the power of Emperor Maximus.

Priscillian's execution did not end the controversy. Sulpicius Severus, who pins the blame not on Maximus but on the bishops, tells us it was still raging fifteen years later *inter nos*, among us, that is, in the Church of the Gallic Prefecture, which includes Britain. Persecution, so far from suppressing the sect, had encouraged its spread, so that "even to swear by Priscillian became the height of religion".<sup>114</sup> Priscillian had become a martyr. His body and those of his followers who shared his fate were carried back to Spain and given great funerals. Henry Chadwick considers the famous pilgrim shrine of Santiago de Compostella, supposedly the grave of St. James the martyr, may actually be Priscillian's grave.<sup>115</sup>

But not all the condemned were executed. Some received the lighter sentence of exile - to the Scillies.

### **Simon's Tonsure**

Winners write history, and in consequence there has been a tendency for historians to view Gnosticism as its opponents described it, an alien belief infiltrating the Church from without. Even before the discoveries at Nag Hammadi it was known that this was not how the Gnostics saw themselves, and nor was it necessarily how they were viewed by the rest of the Christian body, at least in the early years.

The word Gnosis is Greek, and means knowledge. But the knowledge of the Gnostics was not something learned or deduced; rather, it was the soul's illuminating awareness of her own divine nature, a rapturous experience which liberated her from this fallen world. All Gnostics were to some degree dualists, seeing an opposition between spirit and matter, God and the World. They weren't all Christians. Those who were held that Christ came from the sphere of the Good God, and descended among us to lead us back to our true home. For Christian Gnostics, the experience of Gnosis often took the form of a vision of Christ.

The Christian Gnostics saw themselves as a spiritual elite within the Church, true

<sup>114</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle*, book 2 - see Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p83

<sup>115</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila*, p233.

followers of the higher teachings of Christ which on his instructions were reserved for those who were ready to receive them. They could find support for their views even in the scriptures accepted by the orthodox Church. For didn't Christ himself say to his disciples: "It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven, but to those others it has not been granted"<sup>116</sup> And in St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of a 'hidden wisdom' which he had not taught to this congregation because they were still 'infants in Christ': "and so I gave you milk to drink, instead of solid food, for which you were not yet ready".<sup>117</sup>

As Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels* has shown, the rejection of Gnosis in the Christian community is closely linked to the growth of an authoritarian episcopal hierarchy. This is not to say that the Gnostics denied the authority of bishops, but they limited its extent; in their view it was the immature Christians, the "little ones" who had not yet achieved Gnosis, who were the bishop's responsibility; the Gnostic, having direct experience of the divine, had no further need of any human authority. In stark contrast, the authoritarian Ignatius, bishop of Antioch at the beginning of the second century, insisted that the laity should revere and obey their bishop as if he were Christ himself. The two views were clearly irreconcilable. The episcopalian party decided on a radical solution: the Gnostics must be expelled from the Church.

The earliest surviving treatise against the Gnostics, and the most influential, is Irenaeus' *Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge*,<sup>118</sup> written in the last quarter of the second century. Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons in Gaul, elevated to that post after the death of the previous bishop in a particularly brutal bout of persecution which saw nearly fifty Christians executed, many of them tortured to death in the arena for the amusement of a holiday crowd. This was in 177, during the reign of the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius. Irenaeus, though a member of the Lyons congregation, somehow escaped the slaughter, carrying news of the tragedy to the church in Rome and returning when the crisis was over to take up his new post. Pagels remarks on the surprising fact that his writings contain no trace of hostility towards those who perpetrated this savagery, but plenty against the Gnostics whom he discovered in his congregation, holding meetings without his presence or consent and failing to acknowledge his absolute authority as bishop.

Irenaeus' objective in writing his *Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge* was to get the Gnostics excluded from the Church. But that is to say they were at that time a part of the Church, present even in his own congregation at Lyons. Irenaeus' tells us his contemporaries regarded these Gnostics as fellow Christians; but then, he points out, most people can't tell the difference between emeralds and cut glass either.<sup>119</sup> This is frankly to admit that his was a minority position.

According to Irenaeus, everything that Christ had taught the twelve Apostles had been given to the whole Church - that is, to the church authorities - and passed down in an unbroken chain of properly ordained bishops. It was agreed by all the churches

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<sup>116</sup> Matthew 13.11

<sup>117</sup> 1 Corinthians, 3.1-2

<sup>118</sup> also known as *Adversus Haereses*

<sup>119</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p32

throughout the world, *semper eadem*, always the same. The Gnostics, in contrast, in presenting their own 'spiritual' experiences as if these had the same validity of those of the first Christians, were inventing new teachings constantly. There was not and never had been any secret teachings within the Church. Christian Gnosis was a false teaching, originating, not with the Twelve, but with Peter's opponent Simon Magus.

Simon Magus is a scriptural character. He appears in Acts VIII, 9-24, a Samaritan wonder-worker who, observing the superior powers of the Apostles, attempted to buy that power from them and was cursed by Simon Peter for his pains. He thus gave his name to simony, the sin of buying ecclesiastical office. Historians of the early church are not all convinced that there ever was a real Simon, but if he existed it seems likely he was never a Christian, but essentially the head of a rival cult, a Samaritan Messiah. How he was transmuted into the archetypal Christian heretic is another story entirely, and may rest originally on a mistake. Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist of the mid-second century, claimed that the Romans had set up a statue to this original heresiarch, "in the River Tiber between the two bridges," inscribed "to Simon, the Holy God". The statue has been unearthed, and it turns out it was dedicated to a Sabine deity, Semo Sancus.<sup>120</sup> The legend of Simon in its final form has him travelling to Rome where he impressed the inhabitants with his magical powers, until God sent St. Peter to confound him. The two engaged in a wonder-working contest before the Emperor. Simon Magus, to demonstrate the superiority of his doctrine, attempted to fly, but through the prayers of St. Peter was dashed to the ground and so died. This scene is depicted on the carved stone crosses of Ireland,<sup>121</sup> products of the Dark Ages, where it represents the triumph of faith over heresy, or to put it more plainly, the triumph of the Roman Church over the Celtic.

The Celtic Church, in the view of most historians, derived from the normal Christianity of the late Empire and was impeccably orthodox. But the written record tells us that the Roman Church said the opposite. Where scholars now see minor differences in ritual and practice the Roman Church of the seventh and eighth centuries saw heresy. While the Celts defended their deviant practices on the grounds that their tradition was fully apostolic, deriving from St. John the Beloved Disciple, the Roman Church traced their two major offences to named heresiarchs: The Celtic Easter was Pelagian; the Celtic tonsure was from Simon Magus.

It would seem obvious that the Roman Church was accusing the Celtic Christians of Gnosticism. Yet no historian seems to consider the possibility, perhaps because no historian likes to think there could be any truth in such an accusation. But there easily could be.

### **The Church of the Empire**

The Nag Hammadi library was discovered in 1945, buried in a jar in the Egyptian desert. It is composed of Coptic translations of fifty two religious and philosophical texts, mostly Gnostic but including Neoplatonic and Hermetic works, originally

<sup>120</sup> G R S Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, p160

<sup>121</sup> on the Tall Cross at Monasterboice and on the North Cross at Castledermot. There may be others I don't know of.

composed in Greek. The books were unquestionably hidden in this way in order to preserve them: Had the intention been to destroy them they would have been burned: "The Bible refers to burial in a jar as the way to preserve, and to burning as the way to eliminate a book (Jeremiah 32:14-15)... The burning of the greatest library in antiquity at Alexandria by Christians late in the fourth century C.E. suggests that such a ready solution would hardly have been overlooked if the intent had been to get rid of the Nag Hammadi library."<sup>122</sup> As to who hid them, the consensus is it was the monks of a nearby monastery - there were two within a few miles of Nag Hammadi - and the occasion for their concealment can also be deduced, since the books themselves can be dated.

They have been dated from the cartonnage, the letters and business documents used to stiffen their leather bindings, which range through 333, 341, 346, 348, and one possibly as late as 360 AD. It was in 367 that Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, ordered a purge of monastic libraries and the destruction of all heretical books. Some monks clearly declined to comply with this order, and instead hid the Nag Hammadi texts out in the dry desert. They probably hoped to retrieve them when more tolerant times should return. It was to be nearly seventeen hundred years before anyone read them again.

Before the middle of the last century historians were to some extent justified, by the rules of their profession, in regarding Gnosticism as 'the acute Hellenisation of Christianity', an 'aggressor' against the Christianity 'whose cause it threatened to subvert'. But the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library totally changed the written record. When the entire corpus was finally in the public domain, Professor James M Robinson, who had personally struggled for years for this outcome, declared it was time to "rewrite the history of Gnosticism".<sup>123</sup>

But historians are not generally disposed to rewrite history, even when the written record changes radically. And so Robin Lane Fox, writing in 1986, tells us that, in the second century, "heretical ideas and groups survived, catering for those who wished to be perverse, but by c180 Christianity had been strengthened by great conservative statements, none finer than Irenaeus' 'Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge' ... (which) had hastily travelled east as a weapon in the battle against heretical folly"<sup>124</sup> Thus "by c250 worthwhile battles had been won. The 'bilingual ambiguities' of 'Gnostic' Christians were no longer a major issue in Greek- and Latin-speaking communities."<sup>125</sup> "There were no "Gnostics" at Nag Hammadi in the mid-fourth century."<sup>126</sup> The first two assertions show a naive acceptance of Irenaeus and Eusebius, as if their writings were simply factual records: The third defies all logic.

Historians have a natural bias towards the winning side, and in some cases that bias may be reinforced by forces which have nothing to do with academic analysis. Giovanni Filoramo, professor of Religious Studies at the University of Turin, in the

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<sup>122</sup> James M Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Introduction p20

<sup>123</sup> James M Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Introduction p25

<sup>124</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p332

<sup>125</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p561

<sup>126</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p415



introduction to his *A History of Gnosticism*, outlines a difficulty faced, one hopes only in certain parts of the world, by professional students of Gnosticism. "There has", he tells us "been a danger that, by some strange irony of fate, they would render themselves liable to the accusation of transmitting that same religious traditionalism." The accusers would presumably be that group of theologians he refers to as "the new *malleus gnosticorum*", which still "wages its missionary struggle against the menacing Gnostic hydra, at times without distinguishing in its attacks the scholar of Gnosis from the object of his research."<sup>127</sup> The professor himself avoids this difficulty by making it very clear where his own loyalties lie; he treats Gnosticism as a second-century phenomenon and refers to its opponents, throughout, as the True Church.

A challenge to any orthodoxy tends to provoke its restatement in the clearest possible terms, and the Nag Hammadi texts are clearly a challenge. But long before their discovery historians were well aware that the True Church's account of her own history was not historically credible. Her version of events, particularly in the earliest centuries, is sometimes contradicted even by the documents she herself preserved.

The True Church claims to originate in the first Christian community which gathered around Christ himself. Her doctrines and her sacraments are those which He communicated to the twelve Apostles, passed down to later generations of true believers by an unbroken chain of duly consecrated bishops. But actually her Christology is from St. Paul. And Paul did not receive his doctrine from any of the Twelve but always insisted, like any Gnostic, that his authority derived from personal revelation: He had seen the risen Christ. Nor were Paul's teachings passed down to later generations in an unbroken chain of duly consecrated bishops. There were no bishops in Paul's early church.

The earliest evidence for such an office is to be found in the Dead Sea texts which some scholars believe to be the documents of the earliest Jewish Christian church, but most hold to be the product of a non-Christian Jewish faction, the Essenes. In the Qumran community there was an officer known as the Mebakker, defined as the officer over the many, or the officer over the camps. His role was to instruct, judge and care for those in his charge, "to love them as a father loves his children and carry them in all their distress like a shepherd his sheep."<sup>128</sup> The similarity between this brief and Christ's address to Simon Peter at the end of John's Gospel - to paraphrase, 'Simon, do you love me? Then feed my sheep' - surely makes the connection inescapable. But the details of how this Jewish office entered Paul's gentile church are lost to the record.

Ecclesiastical legend, as early as the third century, claimed that the church of the capital city of the empire was founded jointly by Peter and Paul. Paul's own writings disprove this, but the legend may commemorate a real event, the amalgamation of a Pauline and a Jewish branch of Christianity in Rome. For we do have evidence of resistance to such an amalgamation.

In 144 AD a wealthy ship-owner, Marcion, was expelled from the church of Rome as a heretic. Marcion was an extreme Pauline Christian who sought to preserve the

<sup>127</sup> Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, pxiii

<sup>128</sup> Hugh J Schonfield, *The Pentecost Revolution*, p143

teachings of the Apostle to the Gentiles, the only true apostle in his view, from the corruption of Judaizing elements. What we know of him is derived purely from the writings of his opponents, but it is accepted that he was the son of a bishop from Pontus who came to Rome around 135-40 AD and presented the church there with a gift of 200,000 sesterces, which was returned to him on his expulsion. Some suggest this gift was intended to secure his elevation to the bishopric of Rome after the death of bishop Hyginus in 140. Had it succeeded, Church history might have taken a very different course, and as it was Marcion had a profound effect on the development of orthodoxy. He is credited with creating the first Christian canon, and so provoking the True Church into defining its New Testament. In the earliest centuries Christian communities treasured many sacred books, variously ascribed. Marcion rejected all of them except for a gospel accredited to Paul, which is now thought to be an edited version of Luke, and Paul's epistles, pruned of what Marcion thought to be later interpolations. Other scholars since have reached the conclusion that Paul's letters have been tampered with, and indeed that not all the letters were actually penned by Paul. As for the Old Testament, Marcion rejected it completely: the God who could favour a thug like King David could not be the Good God who sent Christ to redeem us. And what Christ came to redeem us from, in Marcion's view, was the fallen world of matter, which the God of the Old Testament ruled over.

The official version of Church history has it that Marcion was banished from the Church in the middle of the second century. But this event could equally well be described as a split in the body of the Pauline Church between those who opposed any compromise with Jewish Christianity and those who favoured it. A Marcionite Church remained in existence for centuries, and was especially strong in Asia Minor.

On the other side of this divide we have the heresy of Artemon, which "blasphemous falsehood" denied the divinity of Christ and held to the Christology of the earliest Jewish Church. Eusebius in his *History of the Church* quotes from an earlier unnamed writer who testifies that: "They claim that all earlier generations and the apostles themselves, received and taught the things they say themselves, and that the true teaching was preserved till the times of Victor, the thirteenth Bishop of Rome after Peter: from the time of his successor Zephyrinus the truth was deliberately perverted."<sup>129</sup> Once again the conflict appears to have taken place in Rome, where Victor and Zephyrinus were successively bishops after Eleutherius. The Catholic Encyclopaedia gives their dates as 189 to 199, and 199 to 217, respectively.

Scholars accept that a theology defined as the heresy of Artemon in the third century would have appeared perfectly orthodox to the first Christian community gathered around James the Just in Jerusalem. What made this form of Christianity heretical was not its age or its lineage, but merely the fact that it did not, ultimately, emerge as the victor.

Historians now generally accept that in the second century the Christian community was composed of disparate groups holding a very wide range of opinions. Justin Martyr, writing around 160, knows of Christians who remained Jews, and of Gentile

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<sup>129</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 5.28, p235

Christians who were persuaded by Jewish Christians of the necessity of observing Jewish customs, and of Gentile Christians who regarded Jewish observance as a complete barrier to salvation. His own opinion was that the adoption of Jewish practice was a matter of free choice, only one must admit it had no bearing on salvation.<sup>130</sup> So, in the middle of the second century there existed, side by side, Jewish Christians, anti-Jewish Christians and every shade of opinion in between.

The same is true of pagan learning. There were Christian groups, such as the Naassenes, who thought pagan religious texts suitable for devotional study. Clement of Alexandria regarded Greek philosophy as a precursor of Christianity and Justin Martyr considered both Abraham and Socrates to be 'Christians before Christ'.<sup>131</sup> Tertullian, on the other hand, distrusted all theological debate as tending to promote heresy and dismissed pagan intellectual culture with curt rhetorical question "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"

So also on position of women: one Christian group traced its tradition back to Mariamne, a disciple of James to whom he had confided his secret teachings, while others held that women were forbidden to teach or even speak in church, for which they had the authority of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation."<sup>132</sup> This must be one of those passages which Marcion regarded as falsified, since in his congregations women were appointed priests and bishops on an equal footing with men, and indeed Paul himself seems to have placed women in authority in the communities he founded. Tertullian originally argued for this extreme pseudoPauline view, but ended his life as a Montanist, a sect in which prophetesses played a major role, and was then to claim: "We have now among us a sister who has been granted gifts of revelations, which she experiences in church during the Sunday services through ecstatic vision in the Spirit."<sup>133</sup> At the time he wrote this Tertullian was convinced the Montanist community was the True Church. Historians of the period now call it a heresy, but that's the judgement of hindsight.

The True Church grew out of a proto-orthodoxy which developed in Rome during the first Christian centuries and from there spread outwards. The Roman congregation's position, in the capital of the Empire, was clearly a factor in encouraging this spread. Another was her wealth.

The Roman Church could afford to be charitable, and charity gives ample scope for political interference, as Paul Johnson points out: "it was a natural development for Rome to probe into the affairs of other Churches, with a view to assisting the victory of the 'orthodox', that is Roman, element. Moreover, Rome had an excellent excuse for such interference. From the earliest times, it had assisted small and struggling Churches with money. ... A dispatch from Dionysius of Alexandria says that 'all of Syria' was in receipt of such aid, and adds that the donations were accompanied by letters -

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<sup>130</sup> see Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p23

<sup>131</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p76

<sup>132</sup> 1 Corinthians 14.34-5

<sup>133</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p50

of advice and instruction no doubt."<sup>134</sup> One such letter survives, dated to the very end of the first century, known as the first epistle of Clement. It is addressed to the church of Corinth, admonishing that congregation for having deposed members of the hierarchy, an action contrary to good order in the church which Clement prays they will speedily reverse. "Money certainly accompanied Clement's letter to Corinth, where it helped to turn the minority into the majority party."<sup>135</sup> However, we do have evidence of a more forceful intervention.

The case of Paul of Samosata is recorded in Eusebius' History. Paul became bishop of the ancient see of Antioch in 260 AD. In 268 a synod was called to condemn him for an opinion on the nature of Christ which Henry Chadwick describes as "akin to the primitive Jewish-Christian idea"<sup>136</sup> but which his opponents defined as "modernistic notions" and as the "heresy of Artemas" (clearly a mistake for Artemon).<sup>137</sup> The synod then selected a suitable replacement and communicated their decision to the bishops of Rome and Alexandria. But condemning Paul was easier than removing him. Eusebius tells us he was popular with the 'simple souls' of his own flock and the 'fawning' bishops of neighbouring districts. But he also had the support of the local political rulers - the dispute occurred when the Roman Empire, having suffered a defeat at the hands of the Persians, had lost control of its eastern provinces to the independent kingdom of Palmyra. So Paul remained bishop of Antioch. There was nothing his accusers could do, until the defeat of Queen Zenobia in 472 restored Rome's dominion. They then appealed to the Emperor Aurelian, who ruled in their favour. So it was "the pagan emperor who decided that the legal right to the church building should be assigned 'to those to whom the bishops of Italy and Rome should communicate in writing'."<sup>138</sup> Eusebius presents the verdict against Paul as being that of the entire Christian body against an obvious maverick. But that would mean a majority of late-third-century Christians approved the action of ecclesiastics who called in state assistance against a fellow Christian. Given the history of Christianity's relations with Rome, from the crucifixion of Jesus onwards, this would seem rather unlikely. Within two years of deposing Paul, Aurelian himself renewed persecution of the Christians.

The point at which we can certainly speak of *the* Church is 324 AD, when the first Ecumenical council met at Nicea. It was called by the Emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor, to settle the Arian controversy - which it signally failed to do. It did, however, draw up a creed, the basis for the familiar Apostles Creed, which was to define exactly what were the beliefs of the True Church, and who was to be placed outside that body. It began: "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible."

What we now think of as orthodox Christianity, Pauline in its Christology, episcopalian in its organisational structure, excluding women from the priestly office

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<sup>134</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, pp 61-62

<sup>135</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, pp 61-62

<sup>136</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p114

<sup>137</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 7.30, p316-8, see also 5.28, p235, where Eusebius tells us Paul revived the heresy of Artemon.

<sup>138</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p115

and excluding Gnostics entirely, developed over many centuries, as a section of the Christian body increasingly accommodated itself to the surrounding society. It was not, in Irenaeus' famous phrase, *semper eadem* 'always the same'. But it was, ultimately, the winner, and it is the habit of respectable historians to take the winners' side. No longer justified by its authenticity or its lineage, this Church is still the True Church on account of its victory. Even Elaine Pagels, in the Gnostic Gospels, states her belief that: "we owe the survival of Christian tradition to the organisational and theological structure that the emerging church developed" since "Gnostic churches ... survived, as churches, for only a few hundred years."<sup>139</sup> Paul Johnson in *A History of Christianity* refers to "a process of natural selection - a spiritual survival of the fittest."<sup>140</sup> He echoes an article in the Catholic Encyclopaedia: "Christianity survived, and not Gnosticism, because the former was the fittest - immeasurably, nay infinitely, so."<sup>141</sup>

But the Darwinian analogy is not entirely applicable. It wasn't nature that did the selecting, it was the Roman Empire. And the earlier forms of Christianity did not simply die out, leaving a vacant ecological niche for the True Church to occupy. Rather, with the conversion of Constantine the Paul of Samosata episode was repeated throughout the Empire as the True Church, with the backing of the Roman state, enforced the necessary conformity. "Compel them to come in", was St. Augustine's motto. The older churches still existed after Nicea. The True Church advanced upon them, absorbing what she could utilise of property and personnel, tradition and texts, and whatever could not be absorbed was destroyed, or driven underground.

A better analogy than the Darwinian would surely be the process of crystallisation. At some time during the first or second centuries a proto-orthodoxy developed, the evidence suggests in Rome, and gradually converted the fluid, diverse Christian body of the earlier period to its own form. Exactly what role the Roman state played in this process before Constantine cannot now be determined, but after Constantine the state's role was paramount. The True Church is actually the Church of the Roman Empire. The process of crystallisation continued right up to the Empire's borders. But Christianity itself had already spread beyond them.

### **The Church of the East**

"About the middle of the twelfth century, a rumour circulated through Europe that there reigned in Asia a powerful Christian Emperor, Presbyter Johannes. In a bloody fight he had broken the power of the Mussulmans, and was ready to come to the assistance of the Crusaders." So begins Sabine Baring-Gould's account, in *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, of the story of Prester John. No mighty eastern potentate, descendant of the three Magi, ever did come to the aid of the Crusaders. But it wasn't all invention. Behind this strange legend there lies a forgotten reality. There once was a mighty Christian community in the east, and it was still extant at the time of the crusades.

Few histories of Christianity give more than a cursory mention to the Church which developed beyond the eastern borders of Rome's Empire. Yet at its height it spread

<sup>139</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Adam and Eve and the Serpent*, p142 & p118

<sup>140</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p43

<sup>141</sup> J P Arendzen, *Gnosticism*, The Catholic Encyclopaedia, Volume VI, 1909

out over a vast geographical area, from Persia to as far east as China, from India to the borders of Russia, its congregation outnumbering the Greek and Roman Churches combined. This church is termed Nestorian by most historians, but according to its adherents, quite wrongly.

Nestorius was Archbishop of Constantinople from 428 until his hereticisation in 431, when he was convicted at the council of Ephesus of holding a Christology identical to that of Paul of Samosata. His enemies, who addressed him as “the new Jew”, clearly misrepresented his theology, and his hereticisation was not accepted by the Christian churches east of the empire’s borders. But other than this they have nothing to do with Nestorius, who lived, died, preached and held office entirely within the Roman Empire. The Nestorian Church is more properly termed the Church of the Assyrians, or the Church of the East.

The Church of the East always claimed her foundation was apostolic. Her story is that when Christ sent his disciples out to all nations the Apostle Thomas went east. After evangelising Mesopotamia and Persia he reached India, where he was martyred, and where a Thomasine Church is still in existence. His tomb, near Madras, is a pilgrimage site venerated by Christians and Hindus alike. Thaddeus, one of the seventy, was sent by Thomas to Edessa, whose sick king Abgar had written to Christ during his lifetime, having heard of his healing miracles. When Thaddeus cured him Abgar was converted, making Edessa the first Christian state - it was then outside the Empire. This story is repeated by Eusebius, so the early conversion of Edessa was admitted by the Imperial Church. Thaddeus, also known as Adi, also brought with him to Edessa a miraculous image of Christ, which some think may be the original Shroud of Turin.

With the exception of Edessa, soon to be swallowed by the Roman Empire, the Church of the East never became a state church but remained a minority religion in all the countries where it flourished. Stretched out over such a vast area, its communications were always difficult, and at times severed completely by wars, invasions and sporadic persecutions. In consequence it developed along very different lines from the Roman Imperial Church. There was no central authority to enforce dogma. Violent disagreements over particular words and phrases, harsh denunciation of individuals living and dead, could never feature in its Christian life. Instead, it became, in the words of Martin Palmer, “a first-class missionary Church”, adapting its form and its language to the peoples it sought to reach with the message of salvation.

In 635 the Christian religion reached China, where it was known as The Religion of Light of the West. Its history is inscribed, in Chinese and Syriac characters, on a stone stele erected in 781 to commemorate the completion of the Christian Da Qin monastery and the erection of its pagoda. The lettering is surmounted by a cross rising out of a lotus, flanked by two dragons. The teachings of this Chinese Church likewise combined Christian and native imagery: Jesus is “the jade-faced one” who brings us back to our original nature;<sup>142</sup> Joshua, the Lord of the Void, who was

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<sup>142</sup> Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, p180

“condemned to the cross so that the people of the four directions can be saved;” Ye Su, who became incarnate for the sake of those who have “fallen into the trap of death and lies”, “become embroiled in the three hundred and sixty-five forms of sin”, who have “woven the web of retribution and have bound themselves inside it”. For their sake he has “set afloat the raft of salvation and compassion so that we can use it to ascend to the palace of light and be united with the spirit.” His followers “travel on the open roads, renounce desire, have neither male nor female slaves, see all people as equal, and do not hoard material goods.”<sup>143</sup> The Church in China believed in reincarnation, and defined its actions in the same way as Buddhists and Hindus: “a person can only change his karma residue by being born again in this world. Do good and you will live to be in the world beyond this world.”<sup>144</sup>

This Chinese branch of Christianity, apparently still extant at the time of Marco Polo, has disappeared almost completely from western consciousness. But it is remembered in the east, as Martin Palmer records in *The Jesus Sutras*. Having become fascinated with what he terms Taoist Christianity, Palmer set out to locate the ancient Christian monastery of Da Qin, whose whereabouts he thought he had located on an old map. He did find it, a towering pagoda on a hill above a village, and beside it a small Buddhist temple in the care of an elderly Buddhist nun. The temple plateau was oriented east to west, whereas Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian temples all run from north to south. So this had to be the place. “The nun asked why I was so excited. I explained that I believed this site had once, long, long ago, been a most important Christian church and monastery. A stunned silence fell as the villagers looked at the ancient nun. Drawing herself up to her full five feet she looked me in the eyes with astonishment. “Well, we all know that! This was the most famous Christian monastery in all China in the Tang Dynasty”<sup>145</sup>

The western churches dismiss the Church of the East as Nestorian, therefore heretical. This long lost syncretic Church of China, then, is hardly likely to be regarded as orthodox. Yet the history of Christianity has always been one of adaptation to surrounding cultures, in the west just as much as in the east. If Pauline Christianity, moving beyond Jewish nationalism, is not to be regarded as a deviation from the original Gospel, why should the Taoist Christianity of China be so regarded? And if a Church which adapted itself to the Roman Empire - the Empire which killed Christ - could still be regarded as genuinely Christian, why should one which adapted itself to the culture of Imperial China be considered any less a True Church?

Historians of Christianity concentrate their attention on the West. In consequence the notion exists that the True Church was the only form of Christianity capable of producing a Church. In fact it was simply the only form allowed to do so within the Roman Empire. Christianity was never limited by the Empire’s borders. Its dissemination began long before the Empire adopted it, it spread rapidly and it spread widely, reaching right across Asia to China, where it went native. Jessie Weston suggests it also reached the far north west of Europe, the British Isles, and here also

<sup>143</sup> Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, p225-6

<sup>144</sup> Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, p143

<sup>145</sup> Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras*, p23

formed a syncretic union with the native religion and culture. Is that so unlikely?

### **Taliesin's Secret**

In Weston's theory the Grail story was covert propaganda for a pagano-Christian heresy surviving underground in Wales: The tale was carried over to the Continent by a Welsh storyteller who perfectly understood his material, and who was himself an initiate in that forbidden cult. R S Loomis eventually rejected the idea, pointing out that there was no evidence for such a cult in the mass of written testimony on heresy collected by the medieval church. But is that the only place to look?

Another scholar has reached the same conclusion as Weston, quite independent of her, and from an entirely different line of research. First published in 1948, perennially in print, Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* is a poet's study of the nature of poetic inspiration. Its starting-point is a medieval Welsh poem, *The Battle of the Trees*, from the *Romance of Taliesin*, translated by Lady Charlotte Guest in the nineteenth century and included in her *Mabinogion*. The poem, in Graves analysis, was actually a series of riddles; the riddles spelt out a secret, and that secret was a heresy.

Graves names it the Arkite heresy, after the Roman Emperor Alexander Severus, who was born in the temple of Alexander the Great at Arka. Severus considered himself a reincarnation of the Greek conqueror and developed his own syncretic cult which included the worship of Abraham, Orpheus, and Jesus Christ. In the early centuries many gentile Christians did not see that conversion to the new faith entailed the rejection of all other gods and all previous belief systems. Indeed, some have argued that the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, did not distinguish between Christ and Sol Invictus, but worshipped a composite deity. Graves argues that the first Celtic converts were of the same mind-set. They had "accepted Jesus Christ without compulsion and had reserved the right to interpret Christianity in the light of their literary tradition, without interference."<sup>146</sup> Thus the native Christianity of Britain was a syncretic combination of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, Celtic gods became Christian saints, and Christ was viewed as the latest incarnation of the Sacred King who suffered and died for the good of the people. When Christian orthodoxy gained the upper hand in the British Isles, this syncretic cult was rigorously suppressed, but not obliterated. A faith which could no longer perpetuate itself openly was passed on covertly, disguised in riddles. Just such a riddle was encoded in *The Battle of the Trees* and, by the same poet, in the *Hanes Taliesin*, in which the miraculous child hero of the romance tells the wicked King Maelgwn who he really is.

The original Taliesin was a Dark Age bard who wrote poems in praise of his patrons, particularly Urien of Reged, and who was remembered as a master poet by later generations. Graves suggests the medieval poet was claiming the name just as an ambitious Greek poet might call himself Homer. The romance tells how he acquired it. He began as Gwion Bach, a boy of no account, who was set to stir the cauldron of a witch, Cerridwen, who was preparing a magical brew for her own son. The brew was supposed to take a year and a day to prepare, but just before that time

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<sup>146</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p143



was up the three magical drops which contain all the wisdom of the world flew out of the cauldron and landed on the child's finger, which he naturally put into his mouth. Immediately he was aware of all things, including his own danger. He fled from the enraged witch, shifting his shape to that of hare, fish, bird, while she pursued relentlessly as greyhound, otter, hawk. Finally he disguised himself as one grain amongst a heap of winnowed wheat on a barn floor, where she, in the form of a black hen, picked him out and swallowed him. Returning to her own shape she found she was pregnant with him, and nine months later she gave birth. But the infant was so beautiful she could not bring herself to kill him, so she sowed him into a leather bag and threw him into the sea. It was the twenty-ninth day of April.

The bag fetched up in the weir of a nobleman named Gwyddno. Gwyddno had a son, Elphin, who was unlucky in all things. In an effort to break the run of his ill-luck, Elphin had been granted all the contents of the weir that May eve, which usually amounted to a hundred pounds worth of fish. But when Elphin came to the weir, all he found was the leather bag, and inside, the beautiful baby. Opening it, he exclaimed "Oh, what a radiant brow", and thereafter the child was called Taliesin, meaning radiant brow. Gwyddno was distraught to discover Elphin had come up with nothing but another mouth to feed, but the child sang a song of consolation, promising "on the day of trouble I shall be of more service to you than three hundred salmon" - and so it turned out.

When the child Taliesin was thirteen years old it happened that Elphin fell foul of his cousin, the mighty King Maelgwn. His offence was to admit the truth, that his wife was more beautiful than Maelgwn's, and his bard, Taliesin, more knowledgeable than any of Maelgwn's bards, and for this he was flung into prison. Having foiled a plot to disgrace Elphin's lady, Taliesin betook himself to Maelgwn's court to free his patron. He arrived during a feast, when Maelgwn's twenty-four bards were due to recite their lord's praises before the court. Taliesin so bewitched the haughty bards that all they were able to do was to play "blerwm blerwm" with their fingers on their lips, like children. A blow to the head with a broomstick brought the chief bard, Heinin, to his senses, and he was able to point to the culprit. The child was brought before the king, who asked who he was and whence he came. The boy replied in riddling poetry, boasting of his own prowess as a bard and ridiculing Maelgwn's bards for their ignorance.

The romance is set back in the sixth century, but the insult, Graves avers, was addressed to the poet's contemporaries, the privileged caste of the court bards of which he was not a member. It was he, and not they, who was the rightful heir of Taliesin. Having drunk from the cauldron of Cerridwen, the cauldron of poetic inspiration, he had knowledge which the court bards did not possess.

There were two classes of bards in medieval Wales. The court bards held a legally privileged position. Like the Irish master poets, they were heirs to an ancient tradition, but in their case it had become ossified, a consequence of church capture of their craft, a process which the Welsh law codes show was completed by the tenth century. They were bound to a barren code which required a high degree of technical skill but a

severely restricted content. Originality was disallowed. A court bard's duty was to praise God and his patron, in that order. They were pledged to avoid 'untruth', that is "the dangerous exercise of poetic imagination in myth or allegory".<sup>147</sup> In effect, they were forbidden to tell a story.

The Grail story has its origins among the bards of Wales - but not these bards. It was the bards of the lower classes, those Graves terms 'wandering minstrels', who originated Arthurian Romance. The division between the two, Graves argues, is originally racial. The court bards belonged to the race of the Cymri, immigrants from northern Britain who established themselves as the ruling class of Wales in the fifth century. The minstrels, though despised by the court bards and denied their legal privileges, were not necessarily inferior poets, nor inferior scholars - the medieval Taliesin was an exceptionally gifted and knowledgeable poet, as the content of his poetry proves. Graves holds that the wandering minstrels were descended from the native Welsh master-poets who refused, or were refused, court patronage after the Cymric conquest. Their patrons were the common people of Wales. Free of interference from church or state they preserved a poetic tradition with roots in the Stone Age. And they did tell stories.

These story-telling minstrels began to be received in Welsh courts in the twelfth century. Graves credits the change to Gruffudd ap Kynan, a ruler of Gwynedd who was Irish on his mother's side and at one time driven into exile in Ireland. On his return he established a colony of Irish scholars in Gwynedd. He made new laws for the government of bards and musicians, so it is likely it was he who first granted the minstrels access to court.

The Romance of Taliesin and its accompanying verse was, then, written by a minstrel poet, a bard of the lower orders, who was in a position to address the court bards and tease them with their inability to solve his riddling poems. His secret, concealed from them only by their ignorance, was a heresy. In *The Battle of the Trees*, Graves holds, he announces his intention to revive this Celtic Arkite heresy as a "pan-Celtic political weapon against the English."<sup>148</sup>

The Battle of the Trees is recorded in the Welsh triads as one of the three frivolous battles. But 'trees' means letters: What is referred to, Graves argues, is an intellectual war, a conflict of ideas. The twelfth-century poet claims he is renewing an ancient conflict. The original battle of the trees was fought between the gods Bran and Beli. Graves holds the myth relates to a pre-Roman invasion of Britain by Belgic tribes and their capture of the national necropolis; a religious revolution brought about by military conquest. The twelfth-century battle, the renewal of the conflict, was directed against the intellectual supporters of the Anglo-Normans, the Roman Church. The poet celebrated the revival of learning outside the monasteries in the lines "The tops of the beech tree Have sprouted of late, And are changed and renewed From their withered state",<sup>149</sup> satirised the monkish theologians with "Room for a million angels On my knife-point, it appears. Then room for how many worlds A-top of two blunt spears?",

<sup>147</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p18

<sup>148</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p146

<sup>149</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p38

and contrasted their dry, doom-laden learning with his own in "But I prophesy no evil, My cassock is wholly red. 'He knows the Nine Hundred Tales' - Of whom but me is it said?"<sup>150</sup>

A record survives of the reaction of one of the court bards to the minstrels' challenge. In the early thirteenth century one Phylip Brydydd of Llanbardan Fawr protests against 'vulgar rhymesters' being allowed to compete with him for the privilege of being first to present his patron, Prince Rhys Ieuanc, with a song on Christmas day. He complains that the speech of strangers (presumably Irish), the vices of women and many a foolish tale has come to Gwynedd through the songs of false bards whose grammar was bad and who had no honour. He refers to the appearance of Elffin in the contentions of Maelgwn, and declares his own song is the ancient song of Taliesin which "was itself new for nine times seven years". It is not for mere men to remove the privilege of God, he asserts, and these upstarts will surely get their come-uppance: "unless untruth shall overcome truth, or the gift of God shall cease in the end, it is they who shall be disgraced in the contention: He will remove from the vulgar bards their vain delight."<sup>151</sup> He denounces one of these vulgar bards, a 'perverter of poetic practice', specifically by name: Bleiddriw, that is, Bledri.

Of course, Graves support can lend no academic credence to Weston's theory, as Graves himself is not exactly a respected figure in the field of Celtic scholarship, to put it mildly. Yet there was a time when his analysis of the two Welsh poems would not have appeared outlandish. John Rhys in 1886 advanced the opinion that the poetry of the book of Taliesin stemmed from a semi-pagan school of bards, in dispute with the more Christian bards favoured by Maelgwn. He held there was evidence that the dispute continued into the fourteenth century, but that it could have been a thousand years old by then: "It may be supposed to date from the time when the Brythons began to accept Christianity, and to have combined itself possibly with the Pelagian controversy."<sup>152</sup>

But perhaps John Rhys is no longer a respectable authority, for who now would speak of the conversion of the Brythons to Christianity?

### **The Church of the Celts**

The current consensus is that Christianity was brought to Britain by the Roman Empire. Its first converts were the most Romanised section of British society, the racially mixed population of the Roman towns. It was the standard Christianity of the late Empire, identical with the rest of the Gallic Prefecture, as normal as, say, the Church of Gaul, or the Spanish Church - which in the 380s elected a Gnostic to the bishopric of Avila.

The Priscillianist controversy was still raging 'among us' in the early years of the fifth century, according to Sulpicius Severus, and showed no sign of abating. By the end of the first decade of that century Britain had left the Empire. Thereafter, in the view

<sup>150</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p44

<sup>151</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p78-9

<sup>152</sup> John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*, p547

of Dark Age historians, a “backwash of Celticism over the more romanised regions”<sup>153</sup> saw Roman Britain rapidly reduced to sub-Roman Britain. After 455, when she accepted the new Easter, the British Church began to drift away from Roman norms as town life collapsed. Ecclesiastical authority came to be vested, not in metropolitan bishops, but in the heads of the great monasteries, the abbots. Attempts to establish monasticism in the rest of the Gallic prefecture ultimately failed, opposed, Sulpicius tells us, by the worldly, power-hungry bishops. But in Britain and Ireland monasticism became the Christian norm, being better adapted, it is thought, to a tribal environment.

The spread of Christianity through the Celtic world did not, as it turned out, depend on the Roman Empire, nor did it require conversion to a Roman life-style. From Britain Christianity spread peacefully into pagan Ireland and was absorbed into its Iron Age culture with the minimum of disruption. There is no record of persecution on either side - a twelfth-century record states specifically that there were no Irish Christian martyrs.<sup>154</sup> Christian religious received the same legal status as the bards and druids, being counted amongst the *aes dana*, the men of special skill. The traditional rights and privileges of the Irish learned classes, the historians and storytellers, were perpetuated in the newly Christianised societies. Celtic monasteries adopted certain native religious practices, like the *vallum monasterii*, a circular earthen wall surrounding their habitations as a purely ritual barrier. Druidic powers, such as the power to communicate with animals and to quell storms, are credited to Celtic saints, Columba in particular. And the Celtic tonsure is thought to have been druidic.

The connection between the Celtic tonsure and the first Christian heretic may originally be linguistic. The word magus, plural magi, designated a caste of Persian astrologers, and is the root of our word magician. Magician is what it came to mean in Latin. It was translated into Celtic tongues as druid: the three magi who visit the infant Christ are termed derwyddon in a Welsh poem; in an Irish translation of the *Historia Brittonum* Vortigern’s magicians become druids; Simon Magus in Irish is termed Simon Druí.

There were many forms of tonsure worn in the Christian world, all of them perfectly acceptable to God, as Bede’s history admits,<sup>155</sup> except for that worn by the Celts, because that was the tonsure of Simon Magus, the first heresiarch, the founder of Gnosticism, the enemy of St. Peter. **If the Roman churchmen knew the Celtic tonsure was druidic, then what they were denouncing in the Celtic Church was the survival of pre-Christian religious practices within the Christian community, a syncretic pagano-Christian heresy, in short. If they did not know the true origins of the Celtic tonsure, then they were simply denouncing a Celtic Gnosticism.** No other interpretation

<sup>153</sup> R G Collingwood and J N L Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, p316

<sup>154</sup> In debate with the Archbishop of Cashel, Giraldus Cambrensis presented this fact as evidence of the slothfulness of Ireland’s clerics, who were thus responsible for “the enormous delinquencies of this country”. The archbishop sarcastically replied that whatever their faults the Irish had never raised their hands against God’s saints, but that the situation would soon be remedied, since “there is now come into our land a people who know how to make martyrs, and have frequently done it”. Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Topography of Ireland*, XXXII, trans. Thomas Forester, on In Parenthesis website

<sup>155</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, V.21

appears possible.

The Celtic Church could have contained Gnostics. Every deviation which distinguishes her from the Roman is suggestive of that possibility. Gnosticism has been regarded as an eastern heresy. Even Priscillian's doctrine was, according to his opponents, imported into Spain by one Marcus, an Egyptian from Memphis. But the Celtic Church was in close and fertile contact with eastern Christianity. Her monasteries followed the early eastern model, even to retaining the word *dysart* to describe their isolated retreats. Her religious art and calligraphy betray the influence of Coptic design. Her wandering scholars went on pilgrimage to the holy places of the east, and left us accurate topographical descriptions in their travel journals. Egyptian monks found refuge in Ireland; seven of them were reportedly buried in one place in Ulster. There was an interchange of ideas, personnel, and literature: The *Salthair na Rann*, an Irish text dated to the eleventh or twelfth century, contains a copy of the Egyptian Book of Adam and Eve, composed in the fifth or sixth century and otherwise unknown outside its country of origin. The works of the Syrian theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia, posthumously condemned in 553 AD as a Nestorian heretic,<sup>156</sup> continued in circulation in Ireland possibly as late as the tenth century.

The Celtic Church was monastic, and monasticism itself is particularly associated with Gnosticism. The first monks were religious dissidents; their retreat from the corruption of the world also severed them from easy communication with the rest of the Christian body - and with the Ecclesiastical authorities. The word monk is derived from the Greek *monachos*, 'solitary' or 'single one', and is first used as a Christian term in the *Gospel of Thomas* - where it means, specifically, a Gnostic.

Celtic monasticism was intellectual. The Enlightenment, mourning Europe's the tragic descent into the Dark Ages, held not only Christianity but most especially the Christian monks responsible for the loss of the high intellectual culture of the ancient world. The accusation is a constant theme in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, provoking William Blake, in *Jerusalem: to the Deists*, to bracket him with Voltaire, Rousseau and Hume, condemning them all as hypocrites: "You, O Deists, profess yourselves the Enemies of Christianity, and you are so: you are also the Enemies of the Human Race & Universal Nature... you also charge the poor Monks & Religious with being the causes of War, while you acquit & flatter the Alexanders & Caesars, the Lewis's & Fredericks..."

But what the Enlightenment failed to observe was that the anti-intellectual faction in orthodox Christianity was actually an anti-Gnostic faction. The pagan philosophical tradition was regarded as a threat to Christian orthodoxy because of its affinity to the theology of the Gnostics. The Nag Hammadi library included Neoplatonic and Hermetic texts. The Platonic philosopher Plotinus had Gnostics among his pupils.<sup>157</sup> Egyptian monasticism did eventually develop a fanatical orthodox wing whose monks acted as enforcers for the ignorant and intolerant Christianity of the later Empire (their most famous atrocity is the savage murder of Hypatia, the acclaimed Neoplatonist philosopher and mathematician, in 415 AD: it is recorded they scraped the flesh from

<sup>156</sup>Theodore died the year Nestorius was made Archbishop of Constantinople.

<sup>157</sup> Though he was personally outraged by their denigration of the Creator and his creation.

her bones with oyster shells). But this form of monasticism came about as a result of a hostile take-over. We can name one of its architects: Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, clearly wrote his *Life of St Anthony* as propaganda for this new type of militaristic monasticism, which was not merely abetted but promoted and enforced by the Roman state itself. It was the Roman state, now Christian, which suppressed the pagan philosophical tradition. Plato's Academy was closed in 529, on the orders of the Emperor Justinian.

The Celtic Church was old fashioned, but exactly how old fashioned? The earliest forms of Christianity included Gnostics, and the Celtic Church claimed descent from that earliest church, from John, the Beloved Disciple. The Roman Church invented an alternative account of the first mission to the British Isles but even her story dates the origins of the British Church to the late second century, and we know from Irenaeus' own writings that his anti-Gnostic Christianity was still a minority opinion at this date.

The historical consensus now holds British Christianity to be a development of the fourth century, a consequence of the Imperial conversion which encouraged Christianity among the British elite. In the early fifth century British Christians were writing radical theological tracts in a clear Latin style, but by the middle of that century, in consequence of the Saxon invasion, it is thought, the British were already losing contact with the wider Church and so failed to adopt the new Easter. By the time we reach Gildas, in the mid-sixth century, knowledge itself had been wiped from men's minds, in the opinion of some Dark Age specialists. Yet despite this strange incapacity the British Church succeeded in evangelising her near neighbour, and Christian Ireland went on to become the university of Dark Age Europe. When Charlemagne set out to revive literacy in his own domains it was to Irish scholars and their English pupils that he turned. His grandson Charles the Bald followed the same pattern when he invited John Scotus Eriugena, John the Irishman, to become the head of his Palace School and to translate into Latin a Greek text of Dionysius the Araeopagite, a gift from the Greek Emperor Michael III.

Eriugena's scholarship was far in advance of contemporary France, where it naturally met with censure. His *De divina praedestinatione* (On Divine Predestination), written in 851, showed signs of Pelagianism and was condemned by the Councils of Valence (855) and Langres (859) as 'pultes Scotorum' (Irishman's porridge) and 'the invention of the devil'.<sup>158</sup> But his magnum opus, *De divisione naturae* (On the Division of Nature), fared better. It is acknowledged to have influenced all subsequent theological thought in the Latin world, and in particular the great medieval theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Albertus Magus. It was not officially condemned until the council of Sens in 1225, when it was suspected of influencing contemporary heresy. Pope Honorius III found it to be "riddled with worms of heretical perversity". It is replete with the concepts and language of Neoplatonism.

Surely John Scotus Eriugena is evidence enough in himself that the underground stream of Neoplatonic tradition did indeed flow through the Celtic world.

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<sup>158</sup> Peter Morrell, *Johannes Scotus Eriugena on The Window, Philosophy on the Web*,

### **The Conhospitae**

A medieval Grail legend, the work of a German poet, associates King Arthur with heresy. Could Wolfram be right? Was the British Golden Age an age of heresy?

There is very little surviving documentation on Arthur's people in his own period, but curiously one of the few surviving items relates to religion. It is testimony to the religious differences between the Britons in Brittany and the church of Frankish Gaul. And it is a death threat.

Though commented on by Dark Age historians, the real significance of this document has not been recognised. It is a letter from the bishops Licinius (bishop of Tours, 508 - 520), Melanius and Eustochius addressed to two priests, Lovocatus and Catihernus, condemning a customs of theirs which is at variance with the practice of the Universal Church. The bishops have learned from an informer, a good and venerable priest named Sparatus, that these Bretons are celebrating mass with the assistance of certain women styled *conhospitae*, who administer the Blood of Christ to the people while they administer the Eucharist. Historians who have noted this letter consider it illustrative of the respect accorded women in the Celtic Church as compared to the Roman. But it is far more than that.

As Fabio Barbieri remarks,<sup>159</sup> it is hard to imagine that a nastier kind of apostolic letter ever reached a priest. The Gallic bishops profess themselves saddened to hear that this "unheard of superstition", which "can be proved never to have existed in Gaul", should have sprung up in their day. The very name "fellow hosts", which cannot be spoken or heard without a "shivering of the soul", "disgraces the clergy" and is "so much to be detested in holy religion that it strikes shame and horror". If this illegal ministering of the sacrament by these "wretched females", this disgraceful perversion of the clerical order, does not cease forthwith the orthodox bishops will be forced themselves to administer correction. The correction suggested is of the most extreme variety, "the death of the flesh, that the spirit might be saved", which action they justify on the grounds that if one of our limbs should prove a scandal to us, we must cut it off, rather than let heresy lead the whole church to destruction.

So what is this heresy which threatens the whole church with destruction? The Gallic bishops claim it is named Pepondian by the eastern fathers, from Pepondius, the author of the schism, who dared to have women with him in the sacrifice. Barbieri suggests this is a compound error. The word intended is Pepuzians, a branch of the Montanist sect, who were not named from any founder but from the village of Pepuzus, and yes, they did allow women into the priesthood, but that was not the reason they were condemned as heretical. Indeed, says Barbieri, they never were condemned as such, under that name. The Montanists were condemned. And none of this, in his view, has any bearing on the *conhospitae*.

If the *conhospitae* distributed the Blood of Christ, and did no more than that, then they were not performing the role of priest but that of deacon. In which case this is no unheard of superstition, no perversion of the clerical order, and nothing which should strike shame and horror in the soul of any informed churchman. For though in the

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<sup>159</sup> Fabio P Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407 - 597*, Chapter 7.5 - where the full text of this letter is printed.

western church women were forbidden from serving at the altar at the council of Nîmes in 394, and eventually excluded from the diaconate altogether, in the east deaconesses were then a perfectly normal feature of church life, and continued so until the eighth century. John Chrysostom, when Archbishop of Constantinople, had 100 male deacons and 40 female deacons serving under him. And bishop Licinius, according to Gregory of Tours, had travelled extensively in the east. Then he at least knew better.

In Barbieri's analysis the Gallic bishops are using an irrelevant case to condemn the Breton priests to the severest of punishments, excommunication and death, and they are doing so in full knowledge of the fact that such punishment is entirely unjustified: "there is no trace of heretical teaching in what Lovocatus and Catihernus do - the problem is all with practice, not with doctrine."<sup>160</sup> His view is in keeping with the current consensus on the Celtic Church: The Celtic deviations have nothing to do with heresy, there is no doctrinal dispute between the Breton churchmen and the Gallic bishops, the issue is purely one of ritual and practice, and the hysterical over-reaction of the Roman side is, as always, inexplicable. I think there is a better explanation.

The bishops are denouncing a heresy "which can be proved never to have existed in Gaul." Now the 'Pepondians', the irrelevant case they choose to drag in, never were recorded in Gaul, even under their true name. But this denial of continuity is a fundamental part of any Roman denunciation of heresy. The Roman Church claimed she alone preserved the true faith, passed down in unbroken succession from the Twelve. Some heresies were ancient; Simon Magus was a contemporary of the Apostles. But no heresy ever enjoyed an unbroken line of succession. As Eusebius explained in his history, Truth would always assert herself and "by her activity the machinations of her foes were promptly shown up and extinguished, though one after another new heresies were invented, the earlier ones constantly passing away and disappearing... But the splendour of the Catholic and only true Church, always remaining the same and unchanged, grew steadily in greatness and strength."<sup>161</sup>

As each deviation was condemned, it was obliterated. Subsequent outbreaks were always revivals, not survivals. That was part of Rome's denial of their legitimacy. Thus Paul of Samosata held a view of Christ harking back to the original Jerusalem Church: The Roman Church denounced him for modernistic notions and for reviving the heresy of Artemon. The eighth-century Celtic Church claimed to have preserved, unchanged, the Christian tradition she had originally received which originated with the Beloved Disciple. The Roman Church accused her of reviving the heresy of Pelagius, and that but recently: Pope Honorius' letter says they were "attempting to revive a new heresy from an old one", which statement Bede holds to be evidence that "this heresy had arisen only in very recent times."<sup>162</sup> It was always a part of Roman practice to place the maximum possible distance between any heretical 'revival' and its previous outbreaks, to further emphasise that the only unbroken line of succession

<sup>160</sup> Fabio P Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407 - 597*, Chapter 7.5

<sup>161</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 4.7

<sup>162</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.19



stretching back to the time of Christ was her own.

And here we have three Roman churchmen denouncing an eastern heresy “seen to spring up in our day”, in Gaul where it was “never known before”, which admitted women to the priesthood - something Barbieri is convinced the Bretons were not guilty of. The *conhospitae* merely “hold the Chalices.”<sup>163</sup>

But there was a heresy previously recorded in Gaul in which women did play a full part in the priesthood. It is recorded by Irenaeus in his *Overthrow of the So-Called Knowledge*. It is the very sect which he was horrified to discover among his own congregation at Lyons. Among the deviant practices of the Gnostic Marcus the one that most appalled Irenaeus was that he allowed females full participation in the consecration of the Eucharist: specifically that he “hands the cups to women”.<sup>164</sup> Orthodox church history would have it that Irenaeus succeeded in exposing and expelling this Gnostic heresy from the western church. Three centuries later precisely the same deviation, under the name *conhospitae*, excites the horror and revulsion of the Gallic bishops and provokes them to threaten two Breton priests with execution.

And in the twelfth century, out of the Celtic world, emerges a legend which repeatedly presents us with the same image: a woman, the Grail Bearer, carrying the cup which once held the Blood of Christ, or which now holds the Holy Eucharist. “Why”, asks Loomis, “since women were forbidden by the Church to administer the sacrament, was she chosen for this office?”<sup>165</sup> Is coincidence a sufficient explanation?

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<sup>163</sup> Fabio P Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407 - 597*, Chapter 7.5

<sup>164</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p60

<sup>165</sup> R S Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p62

## Chapter 9

### Sovereignty

*Adrian, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to our well beloved son in Christ, the illustrious King of the English, greeting and Apostolic Benediction. Laudably and profitably does your Majesty contemplate spreading the glory of your name on earth and laying up for yourself the reward of eternal happiness in heaven, in that as becomes a Catholic Prince, you propose to enlarge the boundaries of the Church, to proclaim the truths of the Christian religion to a rude and ignorant people, to root out the growth of vice from the field of the Lord; and the better to accomplish this purpose, you seek the counsel and goodwill of the Apostolic See.*

*Pope Adrian IV, Laudabiliter, 1155<sup>166</sup>*

#### **SS. Joseph and Bran**

In the twelfth century a story emerged and spread through Europe that made Joseph of Arimathea guardian of the holiest relic in Christendom and Britain its hidden sanctuary. No reputable historian now believes that any actual history underlies this tale. But in that case somebody made it up.

Every writer has a motive, even a dishonest one. Every forgery has a purpose. So why this? Why Joseph?

According to R S Loomis it was all a mistake. A convoluted series of misassociations evolving from the mistranslation of a single word enmeshed the apocryphal St. Joseph with a Celtic pagan vessel and its guardian deity. A copyist's error turned Bran's cauldron into a relic, the god himself into a saint and St. Joseph of Arimathea into an evangelist. The Grail, Loomis insists, was Christianised in error, but then admits "This may seem rather a strained explanation"<sup>167</sup>

Certainly there is a better. The Grail legends came to prominence at a time when the Roman Church was beset with heresies which challenged her claim to be the one true conduit of God's grace. That claim was based on her sacramental connection with the twelve Apostles, the chief of whom, Simon Peter, was the first bishop of Rome and spiritual ancestor of each Roman pontiff. All her ordained priests, and only her ordained priests, had received the grace to administer the sacraments in an unbroken chain of ordinations going back to the Twelve, who were granted that power by Christ himself.

It was only in the twelfth century, when the Grail stories were first composed, that the number of sacraments was finalised at seven: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, extreme unction, ordination and, as said, marriage. It was at this

<sup>166</sup> Papal bull addressed to Henry II of England, see [www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/bullad.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/medieval/bullad.htm)

<sup>167</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p241

time also that the eucharist, “the crown of the sacraments”,<sup>168</sup> was redefined as the concept of transubstantiation hardened into dogma. By 1215 it had become a heresy to believe any other than that Christ himself was really present in the consecrated bread and wine of the Mass.

The sacrament of the eucharist, according to Church teaching, was instituted at the Last Supper when Christ and the Twelve - and only Christ and the Twelve - gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It was at this, their last meal together, that Jesus said, as he broke the bread “take, eat, this is my body”, and as he passed the cup “this is my blood.”<sup>169</sup> By the following day, as all the Gospels tell us, Christ was in the hands of his captors on the way to crucifixion, all the Twelve had fled and Simon Peter, their head, had denied his Lord three times.

Joseph was not one of the Twelve. He was not, according to orthodox belief, present at the Last Supper. Indeed he would seem to have had no contact with the other disciples since right up to the crucifixion he kept his own discipleship a secret, “for fear of the Jews”. Yet it was he who, according to all the Gospels, came into possession of the crucified body of Christ. The medieval legend gives him, in addition, the vessel used at the Last Supper, in which Joseph himself caught the real blood of Christ. So the creator of the legend of St. Joseph and the Holy Grail put the actual body and blood of Christ into the hands of this secret disciple who came forward when the Twelve had fled in terror and even Simon Peter had deserted his Lord. And he created this story at just the time when the ‘real presence’ was a subject of theological debate.

The eucharistic connotations of this Grail Origin legend are made quite explicit in the earliest version to have come down to us. In Robert de Boron’s *Joseph d’Arimathie*, written around 1200, Joseph himself is ordered by a divine voice to set up a table in imitation of the Last Supper, to counter the effects of sin among his company which has caused their crops to fail. Only the sinless among his companions are able to sit down with him at the table over which the Grail presides, and they are filled with a sense of delight and happiness.

Why Joseph? While the Apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* supplies much of the incident, it is Joseph’s career in the Gospels that fitted him for his role in the Grail legend. For Joseph is a perfect symbol for an alternative transmission of the sacraments, outside the authority of Rome. In the context of the theological controversies of the period it is hard to see how anyone could consider that the original author involved Joseph by accident, or doubt that the story was intentionally directed against the claims of the Roman Church.

Non-the-less, a recent theory has proposed exactly that. Richard Barber, in *The Holy Grail, Imagination and Belief*, suggests that the mere presence of eucharistic ceremonies in these stories is proof that, so far from being heretical in intent they were “quintessentially orthodox” and that, indeed, “it is possible to read the Grail romances as a kind of call to arms to the chivalry of Europe against the forces

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<sup>168</sup> so named by the 12th century schoolmen - see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume V, Chapter 14, The Sacramental System*, at [www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/5\\_ch14.htm](http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/5_ch14.htm)

<sup>169</sup> According to the synoptic gospels: Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22. John says this teaching was given at the synagogue in Capernaum, and caused many of Jesus’ followers to leave him in bewilderment.

threatening the church.”<sup>170</sup> Roman Catholic scholarship of an earlier generation reached a more logical conclusion. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1913 observes that the Church’s antipathy to the apparently pious Grail legend is perfectly comprehensible since, among other errors, “the legend claimed for the Church in Britain an origin well nigh as illustrious as that of the Church of Rome, and independent of Rome.”<sup>171</sup>

Britain is not named explicitly in de Boron’s poem, but Grail scholars accept it is implied, that de Boron’s Avaron is actually Avalon, and hence Glastonbury where the body of King Arthur had but lately been exhumed.<sup>172</sup> Certainly this connection was made by his contemporaries. Glastonbury Abbey soon claimed Joseph of Arimathea as her first founder. And those who quested after the Grail were, of course, the knights of Arthur’s court, and he a British monarch, so Britain was, from the start, the obvious destination for this secret relic. The Cistercian anti-Romance, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, is quite certain of its one-time location: the land from which it is removed once the quest is achieved, whose inhabitants ‘neither neither serve nor honour it as is its due’, is Logres - the Welsh name for that part of Britain lost to the English.

Bron, in any case, is British. The Fisher King of the Grail stories derives from the Welsh deity Bran the Blessed, as Loomis exhaustively demonstrates. In the *Mabinogion* Bran appears as a giant king of Britain, owner of a magic cauldron with power to revive the dead. Wounded by a poisoned spear in battle in Ireland, he orders his followers to sever his head and bury it in London where it will protect Britain from invaders. En route, the severed head presides over a miraculous feast lasting decades, during which all present forget their sorrows and never notice the passing of time. So De Boron’s second Grail keeper is originally Celtic, and pagan.

Bran’s career is not exceptional. Throughout the Matter of Britain names, characters and incidents can be traced back to Welsh or Irish originals. The continental Arthurian legend as a whole is originally Celtic and pagan. And on to this native British growth someone has grafted a character from the Gospels and Apocrypha, a Christian saint and secret disciple, the perfect symbol of a non-Petrine sacramental transmission. The result is a story which makes, iconographically, exactly the same claim for insular Christianity that Colman stated at Whitby: It was not mediated via Rome, it was a direct inheritance from the earliest Christians, those who knew Christ personally.

Where Loomis saw an accident, Jessie Weston observed the deliberate combining of pagan and Christian elements in the Grail story. It was, she argued, the product of a syncretic pagano-Christian cult, a Gnostic heresy originating in the earliest Christian period. Surviving in Wales to the twelfth century it was then brought to the Continent by a Welsh storyteller who perfectly understood his subject, at a time when many were ready to receive that forbidden doctrine. She compared this doctrine to an underground stream which periodically rises to the surface. Kathleen Raine makes

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<sup>170</sup> Richard Barber *The Holy Grail, Imagination and Belief*, p135 - 147

<sup>171</sup> Arthur F J Remy, *The Holy Grail, The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Volume VI, 1909

<sup>172</sup> This story is told by Giraldus Cambrensis in his *Liber de Principis instructione*, and in *Speculum Ecclesiae*.

use of the same metaphor to refer to the ancient tradition which inspired William Blake and W B Yeats, the teachings of the Hermetists, the alchemists, the Neoplatonists, and the Gnostics.

Weston's theory of the Grail has not entirely fallen on stony ground. It has proved an inspiration to writers, film makers, and 'alternative' historians. But after R S Loomis' eventual rejection it has had few takers in the academic world. Yet there is no doubting the reality of this secret tradition. It did indeed continue from ancient times into the modern era. It does periodically 'go public', and certainly did so at the very time the Grail romances were composed. But for the academic world there is a major problem with Weston's Grail theory. For modern academia is a child of the Enlightenment. The Graeco-Roman bias of that perspective views cultural development as progressing always from a south- and easterly direction towards the more barbarous north and west. Weston's underground stream, moving from Wales to the Continent, is flowing in the wrong direction.

### **The Marriage of Kingship**

At the time that Weston wrote there were two main theories on the development of the Grail. And there still are. The Christian origin theory sees the Grail as essentially a pious medieval legend inspired by the imagery and the ceremonials of the Roman Church, which somehow got entangled with the Matter of Britain. The Folklore origin theory, now the Celtic theory, sees the Grail as essentially a Celtic tale, originally pagan, which has drawn incongruous Christian elements into its orbit.

It is the Celtic theory, championed by R S Loomis, which now dominates academic Grail studies. The Christian theory still has its adherents, and still adds interesting fragments to the debate.<sup>173</sup> But Loomis, in such works as *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* and *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, has established beyond reasonable doubt that the Grail Legend stems from the same source as the rest of Arthurian Romance, from Arthur's own people, the British Celts.

In proving a Celtic origin for the Grail Loomis believed he had disproved Weston's theory. The combination of Christian and pagan elements in the Grail legends must be accidental. They could not have been intended as propaganda against the Papacy since their origin lies "not in Mohammedan, or Albigenian, or late Hellenic Cults, but in the history of Arthurian Romance."<sup>174</sup> They originate in the north-west, from a time after the Fall of Rome and before the light of the Renaissance reached as far as Britain, and therefore could not have been intended to convey any covert meaning. Loomis does actually spell it out, in pretty much these terms: "In the *Divine Comedy*, needless to say, there is much that does not lie on the surface, but that work is in an entirely different category from the romances of chivalry. To invest these with occult significances and arcane symbolism is to mistake the nature of the genre" and "It may be taken for granted, I believe that when a medieval author intended his readers to

<sup>173</sup> For instance Joseph Goering, in *The Virgin and the Grail*, suggests the story was inspired by church paintings from the Catalan Pyrenees, which predate Chrétien and show the Virgin Mary holding a bowl radiating tongues of fire.

<sup>174</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p7

see allegorical or symbolic meanings, he made them quite plain.”<sup>175</sup>

To illustrate his point Loomis selects an English alliterative poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*, a work composed some decades after Dante’s comedy, but far from Italy, and in an ancient, northern verse form. The anonymous author of this work, Loomis points out, thought it necessary to “expound in detail the significances he attached to the pentangle, the five-pointed star on Gawain’s shield”<sup>176</sup> - as well he might, since it wasn’t a Christian symbol. The pentangle, or more commonly, pentagram, was a recognition sign among the Pythagoreans, as the fish once was among the early Christians. Pythagorean philosophy, and the pentagram symbol, are indisputably a part of the underground stream of European esoteric tradition.

The Grail could not be heretical. Loomis argues, since its origins can be traced back to Arthur’s own people. That is, to a people whom the Roman Church once denounced as a nation of heretics; to a people who, as Rome’s own record testifies, had claimed for their native Church an origin distinct from that of Rome but equally apostolic; to a people who, at the very time the Grail stories were composed, were on the receiving end of the expansion of Latin Christendom.

The term Latin Christendom refers to those regions which, before the Protestant Reformation, were Christian in their religion, used the Latin rite, and recognised the the pope in Rome as the highest spiritual authority. Historical orthodoxy would have it that all the Celtic nations are covered by this definition - they had originally converted to the normal Christianity of the western world and had always accepted the authority of the Roman pope. Yet, strangely, when the ‘Frankish people’ began to ‘enlarge the boundaries of the Church’ their aggression was directed not only against Islam and the pagan Slavs, but also, and equally, against the Celtic nations.

The role of the papacy in the war against the Celtic world is an anomaly which, as said, appears to demand an explanation. Some would prefer a refutation. Particularly in the case of Ireland, long identified with the Roman faith in consequence of later Protestant oppression, the facts appear so unpalatable that attempts have been made to avoid or deny them. It has been suggested that the bull *Laudabiliter*, by which Pope Adrian IV endorsed the English conquest of Ireland, is a forgery. Alternatively Adrian, the only English pope in history,<sup>177</sup> is held personally and solely responsible for the papacy’s role in the invasion. But taking in the larger picture, it was not only Ireland but the entire Celtic world which was under attack in this period, and the assault on Ireland did not begin or end with Pope Adrian. That great reformer St Bernard of Clairvaux, the uncrowned pope of his times, denounced the Irish race in the most vituperative language, and he was dead a year before Adrian ascended the papal throne. And it was a later pope, Alexander III who, in letters endorsing Henry’s lordship of Ireland and demanding the submission of her lay and clerical rulers to the English king, referred to the ‘enormities and crimes’ and the ‘abominable foulness of the Irish’, congenital errors which Henry’s dominion was intended to correct. These letters were meant for public declamation, and they were read out in public, on Irish soil, at the

<sup>175</sup> R S Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p10-11

<sup>176</sup> R S Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*, p10-11

<sup>177</sup> Pope Joan, if she was an Englishwoman as is sometimes claimed, is not now ‘in history’.

synod of Waterford in 1175.

Of course, the papacy had also interfered in the rulership of England. But the case is quite different. There, the pope had endorsed a change of dynasty, blessing William the Bastard's invasion with a papal banner and relics of St. Peter. But William was not officially reducing the English to subjection. When his case was heard before the papal court William was represented as the rightful heir of Edward the Confessor, to whom his family (though not the bastard himself) were related through Edward's Norman mother Queen Emma. In the early years of his reign especially, William scrupulously maintained this pretence to rule as the rightful King of England.

And the church maintained this perspective throughout the period of the Norman kings. Long before England's new ruling class had ceased to regard itself as Norman, its churchmen had become Anglo-Normans. The old English church was not treated as a spoil of conquest, but as an inheritance from an earlier period. The writers who chronicled its history, and wrote tracts to defend its time-honoured claims, did not describe themselves as Norman or English. They were both, by culture and even by blood.

In Ireland there was no such fusion. England's kings never claimed to inherit their authority from the High Kings of Ireland, never claimed to rule by any native right. Right up until Henry VIII's quarrel with the papacy they held the land, not as rightful kings, but as Lords of Ireland, in feudal tenure granted by the pope. The old order was simply replaced, by right of conquest, both in the state and in the church. This was never presented as a restoration of earlier, righteous conditions. In the view of the reformers, there had never been any such period in Ireland. Six centuries of Christian history, Ireland's role in the Carolinian renaissance, now counted for nothing. **The Irish, according to St Bernard of Clairvaux, were "Christians only in name, pagans in fact".**<sup>178</sup>

As Robert Bartlett explains, in *The Making of Europe*, although the Irish were of the same faith as the invaders, members, indeed of the same Church, their social organisation and way of life "struck Latin clergy and Frankish aristocrats as outlandish."<sup>179</sup> For those puzzled as to how such differences could justify a pope turning one section of his flock over as meat to another, Giraldus Cambrensis elucidates, by demonstrating the extent of 'outlandish'. Propaganda is an inevitable adjunct to war, and his *History and Topography of Ireland* was written to justify the Irish conquest in which his relatives, the Geraldines, played so illustrious a role. It contains the following:

There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely in Kenelcunill, a certain people which is accustomed to appoint its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces,

<sup>178</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*, p22

<sup>179</sup> Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe*, p22

and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred.

No one suggests that Gerald is lying. The ritual existed. Scholars have since discovered a similar ritual, the Ashvamedha, likewise involving horse sacrifice and ritual bestiality, recorded in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, the Vedas.<sup>180</sup> It is accepted that the two peoples are related, that the ritual predates their separation, and that it is extremely ancient. The purpose in both cases was the same, to establish sovereignty.

The Grail legend, Loomis argued, “dimly reflected the ideas and superstitions of a lingering paganism.”<sup>181</sup> The Welsh prototype from which the Continental stories evolved being lost, the closest surviving Celtic story was, in his view, the Irish *Baile in Scáil* or *Phantom’s Frenzy*. The Grail Maiden in this story is the Sovereignty of Ireland. Its hero is Conn of a Hundred Battles, High King of Ireland and ancestor of her greatest royal dynasty, the Uí Néill.

Weston also argued for a pagan origin of the Grail legend. Its themes and motifs harked back to a belief system explored in James Frazer’s *the Golden Bough*. Behind many surviving religions and superstitions Frazer identified an ancient fertility cult whose chief priest, and chief sacrifice, was the reigning king. The coronation of a king was once a magical rite, a ritual marriage between man and land. On the king’s fitness to rule depended the well-being of the land, its freedom from invasion, its peace and prosperity, the fertility of its crops, cattle and folk. The Grail legends, Weston argued, originally preserved this belief. It was the wounding of its ruler which turned the Grail kingdom into the Waste Land. Bran the Blessed, the prototype of the Fisher King, is wounded in the foot or the thighs. Wolfram von Eschenbach dispenses with euphemism and states the case plainly; his Grail king, Anfortas, is wounded in the genitals.

St. Bernard denounced the Irish as pagans and the papacy authorised the extinction of the office of High King of Ireland. But Irish kingship was, indeed, pre-Christian. Inauguration rituals elsewhere in the country were less graphic than those practised at Kenelcunill, but there can be no doubt as to their meaning. The king was married to the land, to Sovereignty personified. Their union, the Banais Rigi, or Wedding of Kingship, was more commonly symbolised by the candidate putting his foot in a foot-shaped depression carved into a rock on a high point in the kingdom. Spencer in his *View of the Present State of Ireland* describes this rite as something still occurring in his day, in the Tudor period: “They use to place him that shall be their Captain upon a stone always reserved for that purpose, and placed commonly upon a

<sup>180</sup> In the Rigveda and the Yajurveda. Gender is reversed, with the queen ritually copulating with the sacrificed stallion.

<sup>181</sup> R S Loomis, *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, p276



hill: in may of the which I have seen the foot of a man formed and engraven.” The wedding of Sovereignty was not restricted to Ireland, the ritual was once enacted throughout the Celtic world. The existence of just such a footprint at Tintagel is accepted evidence that the famed birthplace of King Arthur actually was a Dark Age royal centre.<sup>182</sup>

The ritual found its way in to legend. Conn’s adventure in *The Phantom’s Frenzy* begins when he steps on a stone which screams in response. It is the sacred stone Fal, his druids explain, the stone of destiny which will cry out under every destined king of Ireland. It must be set up at Tailtiu where annual games are to take place on whose continuance the Sovereignty of the Kingdom would depend. And it is this story which, in Loomis’ view, provides the nearest surviving parallel to the lost Welsh proto-Grail legend.

Loomis is in thrall to the prejudices of the Enlightenment. His view of the Grail rests ultimately not on his analysis of the legends but on his opinion of the intellectual capacities of their creators. The human intellect did not undergo some massive transformation at the Renaissance. There is no good reason why the writers of Grail romances should not have been as capable as Dante of inserting coded meaning into their tales. Bards and storytellers among the Celts were members of an intellectual caste which consciously traced its origins back to the pre-Christian past. They preserved the oral lore of the nation, and were trained to memorise vast tracts of material. They were specialists. Myths were their stock in trade. How likely is it that they failed to make the connection between the original pagan Grail and a rite then still enacted?

The Grail Legend was indeed put together by a storyteller who understood his materials, and it clearly was designed as propaganda against the Roman Church. From the Gospels and the Apocrypha **Joseph of Arimathea was selected as the perfect symbol for a secret, non-Petrine sacramental transmission.** The Welsh myth of Sovereignty, on to which this story was grafted, was just as carefully chosen, and equally apt.

### **The Welsh Romances**

The proto-Grail story which Loomis postulates, a Welsh *Phantom’s Frenzy* with Bran in the role of Lug, has not been found in the surviving written record. This is hardly surprising. British storytelling in this era was an oral, not a written tradition, and very little of it was ever transcribed. The surviving written record does give us an idea of how much we have lost. We know that during the course of the twelfth century bilingual British storytellers flooded Europe with their tales of Arthur. By the end of that century the Matter of Britain was the most popular story cycle in Europe, and one commentator assures us that Arthur’s fame had spread throughout “the empire of Christendom” into her new colonies and beyond. The bulk of this Continental storytelling was oral, but what has come down to us includes only that which was at some point turned into literature. And only a fraction of that literature is still extant.

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<sup>182</sup> see above, Chapter 1.6 *Arthur and Tintagel*

The earliest extant Grail story, Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, was written no earlier than the 1180s. This is a self-consciously literary creation purportedly derived from another written source, a book in the possession of Chrétien's patron, Count Philip of Flanders. We do not know how far removed the tale in Count Philip's book was from its Celtic source. But *Perceval* does have a Welsh relative, *Peredur son of Efwrc*. This is not, strictly, a Grail romance. Though it has many themes and incidents in common with Chrétien's *Perceval*, it has no Grail. The Eucharistic vessel is replaced by a head on a platter swimming with blood. Despite the apparently primitive element, it is accepted that *Peredur* post-dates *Perceval*. The consensus view among academics is that it is a descendant, not an ancestor, of the French romance, and in consequence it has nothing to tell us of the motivation of the Welsh originator of the Grail story.

But there is an alternative academic view. In *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* Gladys Goetinck argues that behind the surviving *Peredur* we can discern an original Welsh tale which long predates *Perceval*. Like Loomis, she holds that **the proto-Grail story was a Sovereignty legend**. But far from being the accidental pagan survival, uncomprehended by storyteller and audience alike, that Loomis had imagined, this original *Peredur* was, in Goetinck's theory, a conscious and deliberate political creation, put together by a Welsh storyteller utilising themes and symbols his audience understood as well as himself. The ancestor of all the Continental Grail stories was created fifty years before Chrétien's *Perceval*, as patriotic propaganda in the service of Welsh independence, that is, Welsh Sovereignty. And **propaganda in the service of Welsh Sovereignty has, of necessity, to be propaganda directed against the Roman Church, the enemy of all Celtic sovereignty in this era.**

The Welsh, like the Irish, were on the receiving end of the expansion of Latin Christendom, and they lost ground earlier and more rapidly. Norman adventurers began carving out lordships for themselves soon after the conquest of England, and by the first quarter of the twelfth century the English crown looked set to subsume the whole country. A Welsh chronicler testifies to a fatalistic resignation amongst his countryman, asserting that no man might strive against England's king, Henry I, since "God Himself hath given him dominion". Increasingly Welsh rulers and their scribes ceased to use the title king, *rex*, resorting instead to the lesser *princeps* or *dominus*.<sup>183</sup>

It was in these circumstances that the original *Peredur* story was composed. It was one of a trilogy, along with *Gereint son of Erbin* and *The Lady of the Fountain* prototypes for the *Perceval*, *Erec et Enid* and *Yvain* of Chrétien de Troyes. In the form that has come down to us these three Welsh romances have been dismissed by scholars as inferior copies of the French tales. But, Goetinck points out, scholars study the French tales in their original form, but for the Welsh, they rely on translations. A Welsh speaker herself, she reaches a different conclusion: The Welsh tales are no mere copies; they are late surviving forms of earlier Welsh originals, marred by the incorporation of incongruous French material but retaining enough of their original content for scholarship to reach valid conclusions about the date of composition and

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<sup>183</sup> John Gillingham, *The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History*, p111

the motives of the writer.

The trilogy was composed in or around the year 1135. The writer selected for his protagonists names familiar to his audience, the heroes of the old North, British warriors famed in story for their successful resistance to the invading Saxons. He intended, Goetinck suggests, to evoke a particular response in his audience: "These men were our forefathers. If they could face loss of power, personal disasters, opposition of all kinds, and yet succeed in regaining their domain and their heritage, let us do the same".<sup>184</sup>

The stories were intended to evoke memories not only of ancient victories but also of recent loss and recent grievance. The theme of *Peredur* is revenge. Many of its characters are drawn from contemporary circumstances. The elderly Rich Fisher, Peredur's uncle, with his two sons recall the ageing Gruffydd ap Cynan, ruler of Gwynedd, and his two surviving sons, Owain and Cadwaladr - a third son had died by 1135. The severed head, which replaces the Grail in the Welsh tale, alludes to the head of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, king of Gwynedd in the time of Harold Godwinson, who was described by an English annalist as 'king over all the Welsh race' and by a Welsh chronicler as 'head and shield and defender of the Britons'. Worsted by the English king, in defeat he was betrayed by his own countrymen, and his severed head sent to Harold as the price of peace.

In *Peredur son of Efwrc* the head belongs to Peredur's cousin, slain by the Witches of Gloucester, the same who have lamed his uncle and who, with their father and mother, laid waste the country of a stately Countess whom Peredur defended. The Countess is Sovereignty. As for the witches, Goetinck suggests they may stand for the enemy beyond the border with their king and queen - an identification surely reinforced by the prominent role played by Gloucester Abbey in the subordination of the Welsh Church. The abbot of Gloucester "seems to have acted as the archbishop of Canterbury's chief representative for treating with the princes and bishops of Wales" and "was evidently looked on as the man to organise the resurrection of monastic life in the Welsh Church."<sup>185</sup> Numerous ancient Welsh religious centres were given into his power by the Norman conquerors, including Llanbardan, whose Welsh clergy were ousted to make room for a cell of Gloucester monks. At the reconquest the princes Owain and Cadwaladr reversed this arrangement, and were duly lauded by the Llanbardan chronicler as "two bold lions ... who guard the churches and their indwellers, defend the poor and overcome their enemies."

The Welsh bards were heirs to the traditions of their druid forbears. Roman writers tell us that the Druids were guilty of fomenting and organising resistance to their empire. Did the bards inherit that role also? It was just on Goetinck's date for the trilogy that the Welsh erupted in mass revolt.

Their cue was the death of the invincible Henry, on the first of December, 1135. He left behind him a disputed inheritance. As the Norman world braced itself for civil war the Welsh princes seized their opportunity and spectacularly turned the tables on their

<sup>184</sup> Glenys Goetinck, *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends*, p37

<sup>185</sup> Christopher Brooke, *The Archbishops of St David's, Llandaff and Caerleon-on-Usk in Studies in the Early British Church*, ed. Nora Chadwick

oppressors. The first victory went to the south, on January 1st, 1136. The principal southern chief, Gruffydd ap Rhys ap Tewdwr, then went north to secure the aid of his father-in-law, Gruffydd ap Cynan. In his absence his wife took to the field against the intruders, and was slain with her young son Morgan. But Gwynedd now prepared to join the fray. Meanwhile, in the April of 1136, the brothers Morgan and Iwerth ap Owain, the grandsons of King Caradoc of Gwynllwg, ambushed and killed Richard of Clare, one of the most powerful Norman rulers of the region. The illusion of Norman invincibility was shattered. The natives rose on all sides, and as one Welsh victory followed another it looked as if the invaders would be driven from the land. A Norman chronicler records, in horrified verse: "Well have the Welsh revenged themselves, Many of our French they have slain, Some of our castles they have taken, Fiercely they threaten us, **Openly they go about saying, That in the end they will have all, By means of Arthur, they will have it back... They will call it Britain again.**"<sup>186</sup>

The author of *Peredur* called for the restoration of Welsh sovereignty, and that call was answered. By the mid-twelfth century there were kings again in Wales, acknowledged as such by their Norman neighbours. Richard of Clare's nemesis, Morgan ap Owain, is titled king in the Hereford charters. The seat of his power was Caerleon, one of the strongholds he won from the Normans. And Caerleon is where Geoffrey of Monmouth sites Arthur's principal court.

Geoffrey derived much of his 'fraudulent' history from British tradition - but not this, apparently. Earlier tradition would seem to have placed Arthur's court in Cornwall, and scholars are convinced Geoffrey made this bit up himself. As to why, from William of Newburgh onwards his detractors have been happy to put the worst possible interpretation on Geoffrey's inventiveness, but contemporary politics surely provides a better clue to the choice of Caerleon than the simple pleasures of deceit. It can hardly be coincidence that King Morgan of Caerleon was the ally of Geoffrey's patron, Robert of Gloucester.

### **Arthur and Charlemagne**

**In the twelfth century Arthur's fame spread like wildfire through a Europe previously ignorant of his existence.** The forgotten ruler of a barbarian people on the fringes of Latin Christendom was suddenly the name on everyone's lips. His legend eclipsed that of Charlemagne in popularity. **To most historians this is a purely arbitrary choice.** From the roll-call of history the medieval storytellers might have selected anyone on which to project their ideal of Christian kingship. Their Arthur has nothing to do with Dark Age history. It is not generally observed that it has anything to do with politics.

**In fact it has everything to do with the Papal Reformation,** the most potent political movement of the era. The expansion of Latin Christendom into Celtic territories, the threatened loss of Welsh sovereignty which inspired the three Welsh romances, was encouraged and endorsed by this movement. Geoffrey's history was written in opposition to the propaganda of the Reformers, which defined his people as barbarians and their homelands as empty territories, available for expropriation and

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<sup>186</sup> John Gillingham, *The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History*, p112

colonisation. The Matter of Britain was patronised and promoted by the Reformers' opponents on the Continent. **The legend of Arthur, an archetypal sacred king, swept through Europe at a time when the Reformers were in the process of desacralising kingship.**

When the Cluniac Reformation first began, as the Millennium approached and the elite of Christian Europe awaited with expectation and dread to the second coming of Christ, it had the support of the highest lay authorities. Emperor Henry II, himself a semi-religious figure, was acutely conscious of his position as ruler of the last times and worked with Reformers to restore Christian purity, even to refusing to separate from the wife who bore him no offspring. His cousin Robert, King of France, though equally a patron of the Reformers, was more practical, and left descendants.

But the world survived the millennial anniversary of Christ's birth, and of his crucifixion. By the middle of the eleventh century it was plain the apocalypse had been postponed. The panic subsided - leaving the Reformers still in place. The heirs of Emperor Henry and King Robert were left to reap what they had sown.

A movement which began as an attempt to purify the Christian world ended as a drive for absolute power as the monks who now controlled the Church sought to impose their ideals on the rest of society. It was in the course of this Reformation that a celibate, all-male priesthood invented the sacrament of Matrimony. The list of sacraments was finalised at seven, with Matrimony bringing up the rear. And one was left off the list entirely, the sacrament of Coronation.

Traditionally marriage, a civil contract, was not regarded as a sacrament, but coronation was. An eleventh-century sermon defines it as the fifth sacrament of the Church.<sup>187</sup> The ceremony of kingmaking was strikingly similar to that used in the consecration of bishops. Their ceremonial regalia was almost identical. Royal unction was held to confer semi-priestly status on the recipient. It was even held to give him the power to heal by touch. Yet when the Reformers finalised the list at seven they discarded it completely. A sacrament of kingship did not accord with their objectives.

**The Reformers had set themselves to restore the proper hierarchy in Christian society.** As men rightly ruled over women and the nobility over the peasantry, so an **all-male celibate priesthood should rule over the laity.** The highest authority in Christendom was the pope, sole heir of the western Roman Emperors. Of course the Holy Roman Emperors made the same claim for themselves, but they were merely papal vassals in the eyes of the Reformers.

The Reformers' case rested on history. The western Roman Empire had been revived in the person of Charlemagne, king of the Franks. But what made Charlemagne emperor was his coronation by Pope Leo. The highest lay authority was raised to his office by the highest ecclesiastical authority. It followed that the Church had the power to select the lay rulers of western Europe, and she could just as easily deselect them. **The unction of coronation, no longer a sacrament, might prove only a temporary favour.** "Not all the water in the rough rude sea can wash the balm off from an anointed king" proclaimed Shakespeare's Richard II.<sup>188</sup> The Reformers claimed, on

<sup>187</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p193

<sup>188</sup> *King Richard II*, act 3, scene 2

the contrary, that Rome could dissolve a vassal's oath in a moment.

There still survive in the written record incontrovertible evidence of the political intrigue between Pope Gregory VII and Rudolph of Swabia, letters in which the former encourages the latter to revolt against his overlord, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, in the hope of gaining the imperial title for himself. The Emperor had resisted the papal claims to supreme authority, and Pope Gregory in response had excommunicated him. In doing so he relieved Henry's vassals of their feudal obligations towards him and effectively declared the imperial title up for grabs. So effective was this manoeuvre that temporarily, in 1077, submission was the only card Henry had left to play. With the anniversary of his excommunication approaching - at which point it would become permanent - he was reduced to crossing the Alps in the depths of winter, with his wife and child, and begging the Pope's forgiveness, standing for three days outside the fortress of Canossa, barefoot in the snow clad only in his shirt.

That was not of course the end of the matter. His excommunication lifted, Henry returned home to defeat Rudolph in battle. Within a few years he had removed Gregory from the throne of St. Peter and replaced him with the anti-pope Clement III. The conflict between papacy and empire continued to escalate until it reached its climax in the extinction of the Hohenstaufen dynasty in 1268, when Conradin, grandson of Emperor Frederick II, was publicly executed in the market place in Naples by Charles of Anjou, the papacy's preferred candidate for the rulership of Sicily.

The machinations of the Reformers ultimately tore the political fabric of Europe apart and plunged Germany into a civil war from which she took centuries to recover. And this was a logical consequence of the Reformers' claims, as many in the twelfth century must have been aware. Through the sacrament of marriage the Church gave itself the power to legitimise or delegitimise a man's heirs. By desacralising kingship Rome asserted her right to legitimise, or delegitimise all earthly authority. The traditional bonds that held society together were visibly dissolving, and every princely house was under threat. Into this volatile world the Celtic storytellers succeeded in launching a previously unknown hero, their native symbol of legitimate kinship.

The Celtic Arthur is an archetypal sacred king, but not one sacralised by Rome. The Grail legend, always associated in the European mind with Arthur's reign and Arthur's realm, originates in the Celtic myth of Sovereignty, in the ritual marriage of king and land. The Celtic storytellers clearly knew this. And we cannot assume their European audience did not. Sacred kingship was not a specifically Celtic custom; as Frazer's *Golden Bough* demonstrates, it was once universal. And it was not only in the Celtic world that it survived into the twelfth century. A ritual marriage between the Doge of Venice and the sea, the source of that city's wealth and power, remained a solemn state occasion for centuries. And, perhaps more pertinently, the inauguration of Richard the Lionheart as Duke of Aquitaine took the form of a symbolic marriage with the national saint, St. Valery, celebrated in the church of St. Stephen at Limoges, in a ceremony which, in the words of Friedrich Heer, "combined the attributes of sacred

kingship, sacramental initiation and the mysteries of archaic religion.”<sup>189</sup>

There was nothing arbitrary about the choice of Arthur. He was the perfect iconographic reply to the Reformer’s Charlemagne. And we can be certain the aristocracy of Europe who received and promoted the Matter of Britain so effectively, if they did not entirely comprehend the implications of the British legend, were, at any rate, perfectly aware of what Arthur was not. If they did not see him as the archetypal sacred king of the Welsh poets, they knew at least he was a king who did not owe his position to Rome. For Arthur’s rise to European fame begins with Geoffrey of Monmouth. And in Geoffrey’s history Arthur fought Rome.

### **The Tyrant Arthur**

It is not enough, as David Dumville reminds us, to trace any item in the written record back to ‘tradition’. We need to ask ‘Who’s tradition’. The Arthurian legend which rose to prominence in twelfth-century Europe, in the teeth of intense ecclesiastical opposition, can be traced back to Wales, specifically to the bards of that country and their princely patrons, a class concerned with kingly legitimacy and the public reputation of their race. Arthur was the traditional symbol of legitimate kingship among a people faced with the loss of native sovereignty in consequence of Norman aggression backed by the Papal Reformation. But the hero king, saviour of Britain, was not the only Arthur known in Wales. There is an alternative view, preserved in the traditions of a group which was not opposed to the Reformers and their expanding empire; the Arthur of the Welsh *Saints’ Lives*.

In these tales, written in Latin and dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the hero is, naturally, the saint whose life story they purport to tell. Arthur appears in a handful of them, a misbehaving ruler put in his place by the holy man, the personification of sinful lay rulership, laden with its typical vices of avarice, lust and violence.

In *The Life of St. Cadoc* we find Arthur playing dice on a mountaintop with Cai and Bedwyr when he spots the saint’s future parents fleeing from their pursuers. He is instantly filled with lust for the girl, and would have taken her for himself had not his companions reminded him that it was his duty to succour the oppressed. Later in the same tale, Arthur, having accepted the arbitration of the saint over the slaying of three of his knights, agrees to spare their murderer for a blood price of 100 cows - but then insists the cows must all be coloured red before and white behind. The saint enchants a herd to appear so, but as Cai and Bedwyr lead them over a ford they all change into bundles of fern. The real cows are returned to their owner’s stalls, and Arthur is forced by the miracle to admit his error.

In *The Life of St. Carannog*, the saint tames a serpent (clearly a dragon) which has devastated the district and which Arthur was supposed to subdue. In return the king restores the saint’s altar, which he had tried and failed to use as a table - everything placed on it was flung off. *The Life of St. Padarn* introduces Arthur as “a certain tyrant” from foreign parts, who covets the saint’s priestly vestment and angrily demands it be

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<sup>189</sup> Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World*, p166.

given to him. The saint prays, and the tyrant sinks into the earth up to his chin, only released when he begs the saint's forgiveness.

In *The Life of Gildas*, attributed to Caradoc of Llancarfan, Arthur is termed the ruler of all Greater Britain. But Gildas' brother, Hueil, refused obedience to the *rex rebellis* and often came down from Scotland to raid his territory. Arthur killed the valiant youth. Gildas eventually forgave him, though he had to do penance all his life for the crime. He appears later in the same story, accepting the arbitration of Gildas and the Abbot of Glastonbury between himself and Melwas, the king of the summer country who had kidnapped his wife. Here he is again termed *rex rebellis*, and, as in *The Life St. Padarn*, tyrant. A tyrant is, of course, a ruler who has no title to the authority he wields. And a *rex rebellis*? If Arthur is the ruler of all Britain, against whom did he rebel? Geoffrey, in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, provides an answer to that question.

Geoffrey's history takes both Welsh Arthurian traditions into account, the bardic and the monkish, endorsing the one while rebutting the other. His Arthur is the grandson of King Constantine, founder of a new British dynasty - and Geoffrey's readers were meant to recognise this man. King Constantine had three sons, Aurelius Ambrosius, Utherpendragon, and Constans, his eldest, a weak king who, before his elevation to the throne, had been a monk. Bede's British Emperor Constantine, a common trooper of no merit raised to the purple on account of his auspicious name, also had a son named Constans, who was a monk until his father named him Caesar. Geoffrey makes his Arthur a descendant of Emperor Constantine III, now known to historians as the last British usurper, in whose reign Roman Britain came to an end.

Geoffrey's Constantine, however, is no usurper. He is a royal youth, the brother of the king of Brittany, who comes to the rescue of a Britain which lies helpless and leaderless before a savage pagan enemy. The British themselves request that he occupy the empty throne of Britain since the Romans, their previous overlords, have forsaken them and publicly declared that they will send no more expeditions to the aid of the stricken island. Constantine is succeeded by each of his sons in turn, the younger two continuing his fight to free Britain from her pagan oppressors, but it is Arthur, Utherpendragon's heir, who brings the war to a triumphant conclusion. Defeating in turn the Saxons, Picts and Scots, Arthur finally extends his dominion over the whole of northern Europe. It is only when he has restored peace to these troubled regions that Rome re-enters the picture.

It is at the point which John Gillingham defines as the climax of Geoffrey's history, the Whitsun crown-wearing, when Arthur is celebrating the Christian festival with all due solemnity surrounded by his vassals, that twelve envoys arrive bearing a message from Lucius Hiberius, Procurator of the Roman Republic. Expressing his astonishment at Arthur's tyrannical behaviour, Lucius denounces his illegitimate seizure of power and his failure to deliver the tribute due to Rome, and demands that he present himself in Rome to submit to the judgement of his rightful overlords, the Roman Senate, threatening invasion if he fails to comply. In response Arthur does cross over to the Continent, but with an army. Lucius is defeated and slain, and Arthur is about to cross the Alps when news is brought to him of Mordred's treachery. With



Rome itself lying helpless before his advance Arthur is forced to abandon his campaign against Emperor Leo and return home, to meet his death at Camlann.

In Geoffrey's history the downfall of Arthur, the end of the British Golden Age, results from Rome's hostility. It is Roman interference in British affairs, and Arthur's consequent absence from Britain, which enables the traitor Mordred to make his bid for the throne. This story made its way into the Matter of Britain. The rambling Vulgate cycle has Arthur fighting the Romans just prior to his confrontation with Mordred.

There is no account earlier than Geoffrey's history which speaks of Arthur's confrontation with Mordred, but it is widely accepted - even by Dark Age historians - that behind this story lies a real historical event, Britain's post-Badon collapse into civil war. Indeed John Morris singled this out as the one element of the Arthurian legend he was prepared to credit: "the strong just ruler whose good government was overthrown by the jealous ambition of lesser lords, is fully historical. ... But all the rest is the painted fancy of later centuries".<sup>190</sup> But as for Arthur's confrontation with Rome, the episode which, in Geoffrey's account, preceded that civil war and made it possible, that has been completely discarded by reputable historians and popular writers alike.

The Arthur who was received back into British history, from the time of John Rhys to the hereticisation of John Morris, was himself a Roman. Rhys thought him the last *Comes Britanniae*, a Roman military official. To Collingwood his own name, Artorius, was Roman, and indicated an origin among the respectable Romanised families of lowland Britain. In the eyes of John Morris "Arthur's government had only one possible and practicable aim, to restore and revive the Roman Empire in Britain."<sup>191</sup> Following Dumville's attack, Dark Age historians have dispensed with Arthur, but kept the Roman victory: it must have been Ambrosius, Last of the Romans, who defeated the Saxons at Badon.

The idea of Badon as a Roman victory naturally appeals to authoritarian historians as it accords with their Enlightenment bias. But it is also in keeping with the accepted historical record - which is to say, with Gildas. Thus even historians who do not automatically favour the conqueror over the native concur with the standard view. As the communist Jack Lindsay remarks, in *Arthur and his Times*: "it is clear that he (Arthur) belongs to the same line of development as Ambrosius; the way in which Gildas tells the story is proof of that: Badon was the great triumph of the Roman party."<sup>192</sup>

The sole surviving record for Arthur's period, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*, presents Badon as a Roman victory. Gildas' sermon was well known to Geoffrey, it was one of his principal sources, but he chooses to tell the story differently. Where did he get his version from?

Those who have studied Geoffrey's history are adamant that he did not simply make up his material. So he will have had a source for Arthur's Continental war. A couple of suggestions have been put forward. Beram Saklatvala, in *Arthur: Roman Britain's Last Champion*, argues that behind the story of Rome's challenge and

<sup>190</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p119

<sup>191</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p117

<sup>192</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p215

Arthur's invasion of Gaul there lies a memory of the usurpation of Magnus Maximus. Even the speech Arthur gives to his vassals might recall the actual speech of Maximus, designed to inflame his troops against Rome. "Told of Arthur, the story is nonsense. Told of Maximus-as-Arthur, it is coherent and significant"<sup>193</sup> David Dumville concurs: "Maximus is arguably the literary source of inspiration for Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur, who does such great - but ultimately unsuccessful - deeds as a British emperor on the Continent."<sup>194</sup>

In contrast, Geoffrey Ashe, in *The Discovery of King Arthur*, holds that Arthur really did fight on the Continent, not as Rome's enemy but as her ally. The real King Arthur is not the elusive champion of Badon, hammer of the Saxons, but the undoubtedly historical Riothamus who in the year 469-70 AD brought twelve thousand British troops to the aid of the Romans in their epic struggle against the Goths in Gaul.

What no historian, professional or amateur, seems prepared to consider is that behind Geoffrey's story there might be a genuine recollection, preserved in the British historical tradition, of a real conflict between the victor of Badon and the forces of Rome. And yet, would this not make sense of the central mystery of Arthur, how a character so revered in the historical tradition of his people, and credited with so major a role in history, could have left so little trace in the written record that his very existence might be disputed?

What if Arthur were a heretic in Rome, yes, as most of his Christian countrymen were; would Rome not have opposed his rule? If Roman opposition to Arthur had helped foment the civil strife which brought down the post-Badon government and delivered Britain to the pagan Saxons, would Rome have wanted that fact remembered? When we know that for centuries the Roman Church, the Church of the Empire, had a monopoly on literacy in western Europe, should we really expect the surviving written record, the record which passed through her hands, to preserve an account of an episode which reflected no credit on her whatsoever, but made her the ally of pagans, and a traitor to her fellow Christians?

Of course, to historians of Arthur's period the thought that there might be any genuine history in Geoffrey of Monmouth's fraudulent book is simply outrageous. No Dark Age historian could countenance the possibility. But that it because no Dark Age historian has ever recognised Geoffrey's 'history' for what it actually is.

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<sup>193</sup> Beram Saklatvala, *Arthur: Roman Britain's Last Champion*, p51

<sup>194</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p181

# Heretic Emperor

The Lost History of King Arthur

V M Pickin

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## **BOOK 3**

### **THE SOURCES**

*What matters most is that younger scholars should free themselves of an indecent respect for the authority of their elders. Often still a younger man learns to distrust his own judgement of the evidence, and may not command the confidence to challenge established pronouncements until he reaches middle years, if at all. What matters is that every item of evidence be scrutinised exactly and not only is it right that the purpose and bias of its author, the reasons why an archaeological site or object is as it was found, be closely examined, but also that each and every statement of every modern scholar be examined as searchingly as the evidence itself.*

*John Morris, Arthurian Period Sources, 1970s*

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## Chapter 10

### Geoffrey of Monmouth

*It is therefore all the more incumbent upon historians and students of language and literature to scrutinize thoroughly all the sources which they might contribute to this historiographical process. We need to understand the sources, motives and technical terminology of each of our writers.*

David Dumville, 1977<sup>1</sup>

#### Geoffrey's Motives

Arthur was originally removed from our histories on the grounds that Geoffrey of Monmouth, who put him there, had been exposed as a fraudulent historian. But no one who studies Geoffrey's book would now endorse that view of him.

Geoffrey himself, in his preface, described *The History of the Kings of Britain* as a mere translation from an earlier book in the British tongue, rendered into Latin in his own humble style. It is plainly no such thing, and it is equally obvious that he never expected anyone to believe it was. It tells the story of all the kings of British race up to the point when the English finally wrested the Crown of Britain from them, in the reign of Cadwallader the son of Cadwallo, "whom Bede calls Clidvalla".<sup>2</sup> It covers nineteen centuries and ninety-nine kings, starting with Brutus the Trojan, the great-grandson of Aeneas, who lead the first human inhabitants into the island, which they had to liberate from giants! That Geoffrey's scholarly critics once condemned this as a fraudulent history only shows how far they'd lost the plot.

But if scholars are now agreed that Geoffrey's book is not a fraud, that is as far as the agreement goes. What the book actually is, how Geoffrey himself intended it to be read, and what he hoped to achieve by writing it, are still matters of debate.

It has been suggested that *The History of the Kings of Britain* should be considered, not as a history, but as a work of literature. Of course, the distinction was not so clear in Geoffrey's day. For his contemporaries, as for the Greeks and Romans, all history was a branch of literature. The historian was expected, like the old BBC, to inform, to educate, and to entertain. But then it has to be said Geoffrey's history is not a history in the same sense as, say, the contemporary works of William of Malmesbury or Henry of Huntingdon were histories. Many now describe it as romanticised history, and argue that, instead of blaming its author for historical inaccuracies and fanciful inventions, we should give him his due credit for producing one of the world's greatest romantic epics, and for the huge influence he exerted on European literature as a whole and British literature in particular. This is a view of Geoffrey's history which particularly appeals to Dark Age historians, who prefer to see Arthur as a literary

<sup>1</sup> *Sub-Roman Britain*, p192

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, xii.14, p280

creation. But while the book is great literature and a fine showcase for its author's literary talents, this is not to say that displaying those talents was the sum of Geoffrey's intentions.

There is a strong argument for viewing *The History of the Kings of Britain* as a satire, intended "not to make one history but to mock many".<sup>3</sup> Its author was closely associated with the college of St. George in Oxford, a centre of opposition to the Papal Reformation's drive to impose celibacy on the clergy. Geoffrey may even have been a member of that college; Archdeacon Walter, who supposedly supplied him with the British book to translate, most certainly was. Other members of St. George's produced reasoned arguments against the new, rampant monasticism. Geoffrey produced a rip-roaring yarn which simultaneously ridiculed the contemporary histories of the Anglo-Norman monks and poured scorn on their treasured sources, the anti-British histories of Bede and Gildas. It was no unknown British book, it was these standard histories, works known to all educated men, that Geoffrey used and abused to create his history. And Geoffrey did address himself to educated men, specifically to his readers. Clearly they were intended to see how his history was composed. But then how could they be expected to take it seriously as history?

We know it was taken seriously. So seriously, indeed, that King Edward I of England, arguing his case for dominion over Scotland before Pope Boniface VIII in 1301, cited Geoffrey's history as evidence. King Arthur's empire provided a legal precedent for the English Crown to claim dominion over the whole of Britain. It might seem that Geoffrey, a British patriot writing over a century earlier, cannot have intended his work to serve this purpose, but the evidence is that he did intend it. The division of Britain into three principal kingdoms occurred, according to Geoffrey, on the death of its first king, Brutus. All his three sons inherited. Brutus' second son, Kamber, ruled Kambria, later known as Wales. The youngest, Albanactus, received Albany, that is, Scotland. But the eldest, Loegrinus, got the largest share, Loegria, as the British called England, and with it the nation's first city Troia Nova, afterwards London. This story also would appear to give the English Crown a claim to precedence over the Celtic regions.

John Morris suggests a solution to this apparent anomaly: Geoffrey was both patriot and pragmatist. His fictional tale of Brutus' sons was a metaphor promoting a political ideal, Britain as a family of nations. Its appeal was directed not only at the rulers of England, but at propertied Welsh and Scotsmen, enabling them to keep their nationality and their dignity without risking all in a futile resistance against the dominance of their more powerful neighbour. This political myth lies at the foundations of Great Britain. So potent a fiction did it prove that Geoffrey's history won immediate acceptance, but in consequence his satire was overlooked

In Morris' view the confusion over *The History of the Kings of Britain* has arisen because Geoffrey's own motives were mixed. "Parody courts disaster when it is so subtle that men do not perceive it; and Welsh parody aborted in catastrophe".<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey himself had confused satire with sincerity, weaving his own deeply held political views

<sup>3</sup> Valerie I J Flint, *Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose*, p460

<sup>4</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p428

into his narrative, and the end result, Morris holds, was that contemporaries seized upon his politically useful myth and completely failed to appreciate the joke.

But did they? Valerie Flint demonstrates that William of Malmesbury, at least, perfectly understood that Geoffrey's history was an attack on his own methods, and even altered his account of the first Christian mission to Britain, dropping the names of the two missionaries whom Pope Eleutherius sent to King Lucius in response to Geoffrey's ridicule.<sup>5</sup> As Morris himself observes, since Geoffrey was sending up the standard historical texts known to all educated men, any educated man should have been able to see what he was up to. And Geoffrey did address himself to educated men. Indeed his history is dedicated to two of them, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, "whom learning has nurtured in the liberal arts" and Waleran, Count of Mellent, "the second pillar of our kingdom", whom "Mother Philosophy has taken ... to her bosom".<sup>6</sup>

Robert of Gloucester was the bastard son of Henry I and one of the most powerful Norman barons in the kingdom. He was also an educated man who patronised other scholars besides Geoffrey, William of Malmesbury among them. And he was noted for his probity: he was a man who did things by the book. R H Fletcher a century ago put this fact forward as evidence against deliberate deception on Geoffrey's part: his patron would have to be implicated, and we can hardly suspect Robert of dishonesty. Waleran of Mellent was famed for his intellectual brilliance. He and his twin brother are reported, at the age of fifteen, to have defeated cardinals in an intellectual dispute - a friendly bout arranged as a species of entertainment during the pope's visit to Normandy. He was also politically ambitious and completely ruthless. Now if Geoffrey intended his book to be taken seriously as history, if he intended it to serve as a political tool then he surely intended it primarily for the use of his patrons. But if the satire could undermine the history in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, then Geoffrey was handing them a flawed weapon, one which might break at the first blow. Would Waleran have failed to see through it? Would Robert have tolerated being made to look a fool? If Geoffrey's history were not serious, he would seem to be playing a very dangerous game, and to no obvious purpose.

John Gillingham suggests another solution. Geoffrey's history was intended seriously, and for the use of Robert of Gloucester, but not as an historical precedent supporting the English Crown's claim to dominion over Britain. Geoffrey was a Welshman and a patriot, and his work was not put to such use until long after his death. And had the English Crown wanted such a precedent it already had one in the person of King Edgar, whom medieval writers remarked was to the English what Charlemagne was to the French. In Geoffrey's time the legend of Arthur was a threat to the English Crown's claims to a wider dominion, Gillingham points out, and it was not until Arthur's body had been found safely buried in Glastonbury, in the reign of Henry II, that this appropriation of British myth could safely take place. It is Gillingham's view that Richard the Lionheart was the first to make such use of Arthur, and to assume Geoffrey of Monmouth must have intended that use is to endow him with prophetic powers.

<sup>5</sup> see above, Chapter 4.5, *Geoffrey's Deception*

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, i.1, p51-2



Geoffrey's intentions, Gillingham suggests, were simpler. He intended to raise the profile of his own race at a time when other historians had begun to denigrate them as barbarians. His book presented the Britons as a civilized people with a venerable history, as old and as noble as the Romans. And it suited **Robert of Gloucester** to promote that view.

Robert was the most powerful of his father's sons and the chief supporter of his half-sister Empress Matilda in her struggle to regain the English Crown from their cousin, King Stephen. **He was lord of Glamorgan**, and Glamorgan, as Geoffrey twice explains, is where Caerleon is situated. And Caerleon is where Geoffrey cites Arthur's capital, and where in his day a Welsh ruler again claimed the title of king. And **Morgan of Caerleon was Robert's ally.**

The son of the English king who first crushed Welsh kingship was an ally of the Welsh King Morgan. Robert had little choice. The early Welsh successes which followed immediately on his father's death could not be easily undone. Political division among the Norman rulers of England had given the Welsh their chance. Stephen's usurpation of Matilda's throne had set the stage for civil war. If Robert was to aid his sister's bid to regain her inheritance he must either fight a war on two fronts or form an alliance with the Welsh whose lands bordered his own. He chose the latter, and when he finally took field in 1139 the Welsh troops of his ally King Morgan fought on his side.

But how would public opinion view the use of such *bruti* in a war against civilized folk? We don't have to guess. **The anonymous *Gesta Stephani* condemns Robert for his employment of the "unbridled barbarousness of the Welsh", who did not even spare clerics in their attacks. Another Anglo-Norman historian, Orderic Vitalis, laments: "daily the sons of God are slaughtered like cattle by the swords of the Britons."** Equally telling is William of Malmesbury's treatment of the issue. William, as said, was another of Robert's protégées. His panegyric of Robert gives an account of the war without once mentioning Robert's Welsh allies. The alliance with *bruti* barbarians was plainly an awkward point. And so to the use Robert had for Geoffrey's book: **If the Welsh were barbarians, then Robert's use of them was reprehensible. But what if they were not barbarians? *The History of the Kings of Britain* proves the insult was unjustified,** and that, Gillingham concludes, is what Geoffrey, and Robert, intended.

Yet it is a fact that the most conspicuous political use to which Geoffrey's history was put was as an historical precedent, and there is evidence this must have been a major part of the writer's original intention. Geoffrey's story of the sons of Brutus, for example, could have been written quite differently. He could have made Kamber the eldest son, or he could have left Wales out of this division altogether, as he did with Cornwall. (That country was never ruled by Brutus or his sons: Its first king Corineus, from whom the land was named, was Brutus' friend and ally, and he personally freed it from giants, defeating the last of them, the twelve foot tall Gogmagog, in a wrestling match). And then again, choose what purpose Geoffrey's history was intended to be put to, how would his satire have avoided undermining it?

There has to be a solution to the riddle of Geoffrey's motives, and the first clue surely is, as Gillingham suggests, his patrons, especially the foremost of them, Robert, the king's bastard. This is a political work, so Geoffrey's motives must relate to the political situation facing Robert at the time of writing. We need to understand exactly what that was.

### **The Norman Use of Arthur**

Why Arthur? Why would it have occurred to a Norman lord to make political use of a British legend? In fact, the idea was not original. The use of Arthur as an historical precedent for dominion over Britain is inherent in the legend - indeed, to the Britons themselves it was the very essence of the legend. The first non-Britons to exploit its political potential were the Norman conquerors of England, in the days of Robert's grandfather.

The spread of Arthur's fame into Europe begins, not with Geoffrey, but with Breton storytellers enjoying Norman patronage in the previous century. Not to detract from Geoffrey's achievement, it is still thought he radically accelerated the process, but the written record proves the process actually began soon after 1066. As to why the Normans, neighbours of the Bretons for generations, should have suddenly developed an interest in their legends after this date, that isn't hard to understand. The essence of the Britons' faith in Arthur was that he, who had led them to victory against the pagans who had robbed them of the land rightfully theirs, would return to renew that struggle. For the Bretons in William's army, rewarded with English lands for their part in the 1066 invasion, that prophecy was in part fulfilled. For them, this was not a usurpation but a restitution - a perspective their Norman allies were happy to share with the rest of Europe.

It may seem strange to us that the Normans were concerned to present their invasion of England as something other than naked aggression, but there can be no question that they were. William the Bastard not only took care to secure the blessing of both pope and emperor for his invasion, presenting himself as the champion of the Papal Reformation and the chosen heir of Edward the Confessor, he even made out Harold Godwin had sworn over saints bones to support his accession. These precautions make more sense when we remember we are viewing history the wrong way up. We know the Normans got away with it - much of the land is still in the hands of their descendants today. But they couldn't have known that at the time. Recent history held up to them the example of Denmark's Cnut, a fellow Viking, founder of a mighty northern Empire centred on England - which did not long survive his own death. After the short-lived rule of his sons the ancient royal dynasty of the English returned to the throne in the person of Edward the Confessor. Though it was Edward's accession which first exposed England to Norman predation, the historical precedent it presented to them can hardly have been comforting.

Usurpations generally present themselves as restorations of an earlier legitimacy, and the Norman seizure of England was no exception. The Norman propaganda machine did a thorough job on England's King Harold Godwinson, and there's no

denying he was an easy target, born of no ancient line<sup>7</sup> and tarnished by association with the unreformable Bishop Stigand. But all this became irrelevant soon after Hastings. For William did not take the throne from Harold but from Edgar the Aetheling, whom the royal council hastened to elect immediately the news of Harold's death reached London. No matter what the deficiencies of Harold's claim, Edgar was undoubtedly the rightful heir, born of the line of Alfred the Great, whereas in English law, William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, had no claim whatsoever. And although Edgar soon surrendered the Crown to the Normans ravaging a land he couldn't defend, that wasn't the end of the matter.

At this stage we can answer John Gillingham's caveat, why would the rulers of England look to Arthur for a precedent for dominion over Britain, when they already had one in King Edgar? The question is, who had Edgar?

After his surrender the Aetheling Edgar remained for some months in William's court as his honoured guest, and then suddenly fled in fear of his life. It didn't take him long to find shelter, and allies, most prominent among them Malcolm, King of Scotland (who married his sister) and Sweyn, King of Denmark. Together they raised the flag of revolt in the north of England, where they enjoyed massive support from the Anglo-Danish population. Their objective seems to have been the re-establishment of the Danelaw, and early victories promised success: "...in the autumn of 1069 it must have seemed possible that a Scandinavian kingdom might once more be established in northern England, or even a realm created for Edgar Aetheling, buttressed by the support of Malcolm and Sweyn, and perhaps even to be sanctioned with a separate coronation by a metropolitan archbishop of the distinct ecclesiastical province of York."<sup>8</sup>

And if William lost the Danelaw, how soon before he lost all? The news of Edgar's success sparked patriotic revolts throughout England. It looked as if the Norman yoke might be thrown off almost as soon as imposed. In the view of his biographer, D C Douglas, it was this massive threat to his position which provoked William to genocide.

Why King Arthur, rather than King Edgar? In those early, difficult years of Norman England, and, surely, for ever after for those Normans who lived through them, the very words 'king' and 'Edgar', strung together, must have struck a discordant note. The use of that particular monarch, as an historical precedent of any sort, would have to wait until the Normans became the Anglo-Normans - and they didn't do that all together at one time.

### **The Anglo-Normans**

This transformation began in the church, where Norman ecclesiastics, in defence of their newly acquired properties, were happy to see themselves as heirs to the ancient Saxon church and to the rights granted it by saintly English kings. The accession and marriage of Henry I greatly accelerated the process.

<sup>7</sup> This is now disputed. A recent theory makes Harold a descendant of Ethelred, elder brother of Alfred the Great. See [wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin%2C\\_Earl\\_of\\_Wessex](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin%2C_Earl_of_Wessex)

<sup>8</sup> David C Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, p219

One of three sons of William the Bastard, Henry's prospects at his father's death did not look promising. In conformity with Norman custom William left the lands inherited from his own father to his eldest son Robert. Custom left him free to choose who should rule his swordlands, the lands taken by conquest, and he chose William, known as Rufus, to be king of England after him. To Henry he left 5,000 silver pounds. But William Rufus was soon in bad odour with church and died in mysterious circumstances while hunting in the New Forest. Henry, who was present when the 'accident' occurred, raced from the scene to secure the royal treasury, and thus succeeded to his brother's throne. He later wrested Normandy from Robert, making himself his father's sole heir.

Within months of his accession Henry married Matilda of Scotland, the niece of the Aetheling. This would not only have pleased his English subjects, it doubtless pleased the Roman church: her mother, Queen Margaret, was made Saint Margaret for her determined efforts to eradicate the last remnants of the Celtic Church in her husband's kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

But not everyone was delighted with the match. William of Malmesbury records that some among the Norman lords mockingly referred to Henry and his Saxon queen as 'Godric and Godgifu'<sup>10</sup>. And if there were Normans who resented and resisted the union of the two races, how must the Breton beneficiaries of the conquest have viewed this development?

At one time it appeared inevitable that the royal line of Wessex would return to the English throne on the death of King Henry. But in 1120 his son by Matilda drowned in the wreck of the White Ship. However, the couple also had a daughter, widow of the late Emperor Henry V. Failing to get a son by his second wife, in 1128 King Henry recalled the Empress from Germany and married her to Geoffrey of Anjou, making his barons swear homage to the couple. Alternatively there was Stephen of Blois, the king's nephew: Henry had arranged his marriage to another descendant of Alfred, Matilda of Boulogne, the Queen's niece, so his accession would only postpone the return of the Wessex dynasty by a generation. But though it is often forgotten, there was a third claimant to Henry's throne, unrelated to the Saxon royal house by blood or marriage; the king's eldest son, Robert of Gloucester.

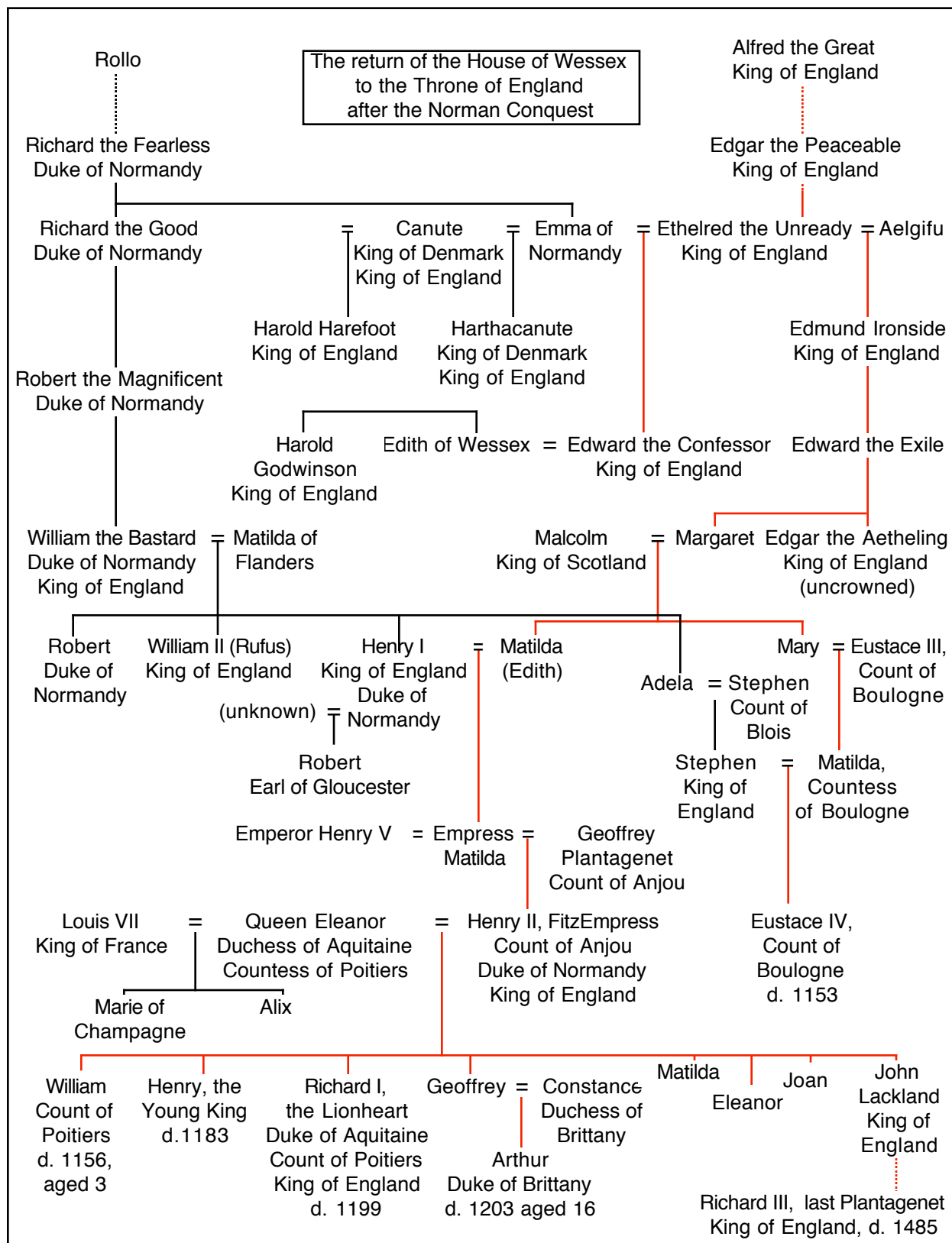
### **King Robert**

Robert was a bastard. But so was his grandfather William, and that hadn't prevented him from inheriting his father's domains. In the absence of 'legitimate' offspring it was, in lay opinion, still perfectly acceptable for sons born of such unions to be named their father's heirs - particularly among Robert's own people, the Normans. The eleventh-century historian Raoul Glaber even states that the Normans were "almost always ruled over by princes born of illicit unions" adding "this custom will not be thought too

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<sup>9</sup> This Malcolm is the enemy of MacBeth, the last king of Scotland by Celtic right, immortalised in Shakespeare's 'Scottish play'. He no more deserved this treatment than did Richard III, and the saintly Duncan died on the battlefield.

<sup>10</sup> R H C Davis, *The Normans and Their Myth*, p129



reprehensible if we remember the sons of the concubines of Jacob".<sup>11</sup>

Henry did not name Robert his heir. He named his legitimate daughter and her husband, the duke of Anjou. But, despite their oath, the Norman barons were never going to accept their rule since the Angevins were traditional enemies of the Normans and the Empress Matilda was a woman! And Henry himself, it seems, by the time of his death, no longer favoured this option - he was by then at war with his son-in-law. In the end, no-one expected a peaceful succession: R C H Davis, in his biography of King Stephen, remarks that waiting for Henry's death must have been like waiting for the Bomb. According to Davis the old king realised that by publicly disinheriting Matilda "he would only have made a bad situation worse" so instead he signalled his change of heart by the death-bed provisions he made for his son:

All that Henry could usefully do was to show where his affections lay, by leaving Earl Robert '60,000 pounds' from his treasury at Falaise as a donative for his servants and mercenaries. If with the 5,000 pounds which the Conqueror had left him, Henry had been able to win both England and Normandy, what might not Robert do with 60,000?<sup>12</sup>

But Robert missed his chance. Civil war was averted at this point by the sheer speed with which Stephen secured throne for himself - though it seems his brother Henry, bishop of Winchester, deserves the credit for this. By December 22nd, a mere three weeks after Henry's passing, Stephen had secured the treasury and got himself anointed king. Recognition from the pope soon followed; the oath to Matilda was conveniently forgotten in the exciting prospect of the joint rule of Stephen and his Reforming brother Henry, "wielding the spiritual and secular swords in loving harmony"<sup>13</sup> (an alliance eventually broken up by the machinations of Waleran of Mellent). After three months Earl Robert crossed over into England and did homage to Stephen for his lands. He did so, as he was later to claim, for his own reasons. Mutual animosity between the two cousins never lessened, hostile 'incidents' began almost immediately on Robert's return, and it was plain an open breach must occur sooner or later. Within three years Robert was assisting his sister's bid to unseat Stephen.

It was in May 1138 that Robert finally declared his support for Matilda, renouncing his oath to Stephen (this being the sort of man he was) with all due respect to the proper forms - the legal term was *diffidatio*, defiance. But what was Robert up to in the years between the death of his father and his public renunciation of Stephen's kingship? Historians accept William of Malmesbury's interpretation. In his apologia for Robert he claims the earl's loyalty was always secretly towards his sister Matilda, his submission to Stephen a ruse to cover his presence in England, enabling him to keep an eye on a developing situation. But why keep his loyalty to Matilda secret, when his opposition to Stephen was open knowledge? This secrecy was certainly of no benefit to the Empress; as Stephen's biographer notes; Robert's original submission to

<sup>11</sup> see George Duby *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, p42

<sup>12</sup> R C H Davis, *King Stephen*, p15

<sup>13</sup> R C H Davis, *King Stephen*, p18

Stephen after his father's death "was undoubtedly a severe blow to his sister's cause."<sup>14</sup> Surely there is only one logical explanation. If Robert was not in Matilda's camp until May 1138, then before this date he had not given up hope of gaining the throne himself.

It was in this crucial period that Geoffrey wrote *The History of the Kings of Britain*, later to be used by the Angevins, descendants of Empress Matilda, to claim dominion over the whole island. To have intended this, Gillingham argues, Geoffrey would have to be psychic. He didn't intend it. **The king of England for whom Geoffrey designed this tool was Robert of Gloucester, ally of the Welsh King Morgan, the one claimant to Henry's throne who had no connection with the English royal line.**

### **Robert's Faction**

The clue to Geoffrey's history lies in the precise political situation facing his patron. The apparent confusion of Geoffrey's motives dissipates when we consider what Robert was up against. What he needed at this juncture was not an historical precedent for the English Crown's dominion over Britain, but a precedent for that dominion to be exercised outside the dominion of Rome.

Scholars have remarked on the fact that Geoffrey's history is directed against Rome. But they have seen this purely in terms of the British literary tradition: 'Nennius' also regards the Romans as racial enemies of the British. Geoffrey, however, isn't simply adhering to literary custom; he is addressing a contemporary reality.

The Roman church claimed to be the sole heir of the Roman Empire in the west: All lay rulers of Latin Christendom owed homage to the pope as their feudal lord, and could be imposed or removed at his pleasure. This was an extravagant claim when first mooted, but by Geoffrey's time it was becoming uncomfortably close to a reality. The papacy had proved it could bring even Emperors to their knees. If all the lay rulerships were not exactly in her gift, she was certainly in a position to influence the choice of ruler when the succession was in dispute. And she was not likely to favour Robert of Gloucester.

The problem was his bastardy. His grandfather had enjoyed excellent relations with the papacy which not only endorsed his title to his father's lands but backed his seizure of the English Crown. King William the Bastard was never a problem for the Reformers. But unfortunately for Robert, by his time the Reformers, having extended their ambitions beyond the field of clerical marriage were now deeply engaged in 'regularising' the unions of the aristocracy, a process which involved a complete degradation of the inheritance rights of bastards.

So Robert was the one claimant to Henry's throne who was not going to enjoy the support of the Reformers. Which meant Robert was the candidate in whom opponents of the Papal Reformation were likely to repose their hopes. In that group we can include all patriotic Celts, whether Bretons, Welsh or Cornishmen; all supporters of clerical marriage, such as the clique gathered at Oxford; and all those Norman aristocrats who resented monkish interference in their sex lives and the seizure by

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<sup>14</sup> R C H Davis, *King Stephen*, p35

churchmen of political power which should rightly be in their hands. Prominent among the last was Waleran of Mellent.

It is generally held that Geoffrey's patrons were on opposite sides in the civil war. But this is a mistake. Waleran was never on any side but his own. He was shown conspicuous favour by King Stephen from the first, but that didn't stop him from going over to Henry FitzEmpress once Stephen's cause was fatally damaged - though he was himself the principal cause of that damage. Waleran's anticlerical drive had pitted Stephen against powerful and necessary supporters, including Roger, bishop of Salisbury, who with his nephews controlled the chancery and the exchequer, and Henry, bishop of Winchester, Stephen's brother, to whom he owed his throne. Waleran's ambition was boundless. Then consider his position at the start of Stephen's reign, when his clerical rivals were firmly ensconced around the throne. We know he succeeded in unseating them, but that can't have seemed a likely prospect at the time. For Waleran, King Robert must surely have appeared the best option.

Did the brilliant Waleran have a hand in the conception of *The History of the Kings of Britain*? History can't answer. The exact role of Geoffrey's Oxford colleagues is also lost to the record. But exactly what the book was for can be determined, for it contains one of those technical terms which David Dumville bids us look out for. It has so far escaped the notice of historians because they missed the exact political context in which Geoffrey wrote. But to Geoffrey's contemporaries it would be unmistakable.

### **Geoffrey's Technical Terminology**

What Robert needed was a legal defence against Rome's claim to dominion over the Crown he hoped to inherit. That claim was not based solely on the Donation of Constantine; in the case of England, Rome advanced an additional proof, Peter's Pence. This tax of a penny per household was traditionally levied by English kings on their subjects as a pious gift to the Roman church. But when the Reformers took over the papacy they redefined Peter's Pence as a form of tribute, and thus further proof of Rome's feudal rights over the English Crown. This is why, in rejecting the pope's demand that he do homage for England, Robert's grandfather William found it necessary specifically to deny that Peter's Pence, which he had agreed to resume paying, had the significance Pope Gregory claimed for it:

Your legate... has admonished me to profess allegiance to you and your successors, and to think better regarding the money which my predecessors were wont to send to the Church of Rome. I have consented to the one but not to the other. I have not consented to pay fealty, nor will I now because I never promised it, nor do I find that my predecessors ever paid it to your predecessors.<sup>15</sup>

Geoffrey's refutation is a good deal more thorough. His entire history is a demolition of Rome's case for dominion, and it is all neatly summarised in a speech he puts into

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<sup>15</sup> David C Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, p340



the mouth of King Arthur. It must be repeated: in Geoffrey's day this was the normal and accepted practice of historians. That this was Geoffrey's composition, not Arthur's, would be taken for granted. Contemporary readers would not be asking 'but where is this recorded?', they would be following the argument. And the argument, in its day, was unanswerable.

The speech is delivered by Arthur to his chief vassals who have met in council to consider their response to Rome's challenge to Arthur's rule. It is replete with that technical term, *tribute*:

For myself, I do not consider that we ought to fear his coming very much, seeing with what a trumped-up case he is demanding the *tribute* which he wants to exact from Britain. He says that he ought to be given it because it used to be paid to Julius Caesar and those who succeeded him. When these men landed with their armed band and conquered our fatherland by force and violence at a time when it had been weakened by civil dissensions, they had been encouraged to come here by the disunity of our ancestors. Seeing that they seized the country in this way, it was wrong of them to exact tribute from it. Nothing that is acquired by force and violence can ever be held legally by anyone. In so far as the Roman has done us violence, he pleads an unreasonable case when he maintains that we are his tributaries in the eyes of the law. ... If the Roman decrees that tribute ought to be paid him by Britain simply because Julius Caesar and other Roman leaders conquered this country years ago, then I decree in the same way that Rome ought to give me tribute, in that my ancestors once captured that city. Belinus, that most glorious of the Kings of the Britons, with the help of his brother Brennius, the Duke of the Allobroges, hanged twenty of the noblest Romans in the middle of their own forum, captured the city, and when they had occupied it, held it for a long time. Similarly Constantine, the son of Helen, and Maximianus too, both of them close relations of mine, wearing the crown of Britain, one after the other, each gained the throne of imperial Rome. Do you not agree, then, that it is we who should demand tribute of Rome?

And so begins Arthur's victorious war on the Continent, in which Procurator Lucius loses his life. Arthur orders that his corpse be carried to Senate "with a message that no other tribute could be expected from Britain."

### **Geoffrey's Case**

Of course this is pseudo-history in the eyes of modern historians, but that is not the issue. What we have to observe is how Geoffrey's readers would have understood him at the time, and how valid in their eyes was the argument he was presenting.

Geoffrey's history was not divorced from the history known to his contemporaries. His British conquest of Rome was not ludicrous. A Celtic force had indeed sacked Rome under a leader named Brennus, and why should his readers doubt this was the

same Brennius, brother of Belinus, remembered in British tradition? Apparently they did not doubt it: "the status of Brennius and Belinus" Gillingham tells us "was less insecure than that of Arthur".<sup>16</sup>

As for Constantine and Maximianus, both were raised to the purple in Britain, as Geoffrey's readers would have known. We know that Maximus was a Spaniard, and no historian chooses to credit his noble British wife. Likewise Constantine's mother is now written down as a barmaid from one of the eastern provinces. But to Geoffrey's contemporaries Helen was a British princess, and a saint. His portrayal of the two Emperors as British kings would not, at the time, have struck a false note.

And then there is the statement that "Nothing that is acquired by force and violence can ever be held legally by anyone". Lewis Thorpe appends a footnote to this in his translation: "In view of Arthur's recent activities in Europe, this is a very bland statement." But this misses the significance of Geoffrey's wording: 'held by *anyone*'. This is directed, not at the Rome of Arthur's day, but at the contemporary opponent of the Britons, the Roman Church which claimed to have inherited that dominion: A dominion which, as Geoffrey reminds us, originated in a pagan conquest. Now at the time, the Reformers, in their struggle to establish their ascendancy over the laity, "took the uncharitable view that as men of blood knights were damned"<sup>17</sup> The only justification for violence, in the church's teaching, was the armed defence of Christendom against her enemies. But Rome was here making war on an anointed Christian king, the rescuer of his Christian people - a people that Rome had abandoned in face of pagan attack.

And Geoffrey isn't making this up, this part of his story is taken straight from Gildas. Indeed, just to make sure his readers recognise his source, Geoffrey here copies Gildas almost word for word. And as for the legal implications, Geoffrey spells these out in another of his speeches, this one put into the mouth of Guithelinus, archbishop of London.

There is no archbishop Guithelinus in Gildas' account. But Gildas does tell us the Romans "informed our country" of their decision to abandon the province. Geoffrey takes his cue, telling us where, when, and by whom the Romans informed our country: They command all men of military age to assemble in London, where Bishop Guithelinus is ordered to break the bad news to them. He begins by confessing that "I feel more like bursting into tears than embarking upon a lofty discourse..." Gildas' Romans see no reason why the Britons should not be able to defend themselves; only their laziness and stupidity prevent them from doing so. Geoffrey's Guithelinus lets us know exactly why the Britons are doomed by Rome's decision. All Britain's fighting men having already migrated to Brittany, those who remain are poor witless peasants, with no training in war. And all Geoffrey's contemporaries would know you can't make a fighting man out of a peasant: the military training of a knight had to begin in boyhood.

Guithelinus summarises the Roman decision in one line: "The Romans are tired of all this perpetual travelling-about which they have to do in order to fight your enemies

<sup>16</sup> John Gillingham, *The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History*, p102, footnote 20

<sup>17</sup> *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, A T Hatto, *An Introduction to a Second Reading*, p414

for you. They now elect to forgo all the tribute which you pay...".

The sentence is unmistakably Gildas, aside from the tribute reference. But no contemporary could fault Geoffrey for his insertion. The legal case, in Geoffrey's day, is exactly as he presents it. The feudal bond was contractual, freely entered into and binding on both partners, as medieval historians acknowledge: "Glanville, the earliest of the great medieval English jurists, was clear that a vassal owed his lord no more than a lord owed his vassal, reverence alone excepted. If the lord broke faith, the vassal was released from his obligation to serve."<sup>18</sup> That is, if the lord broke faith, the vassal was no more his vassal.

The Romans had gone for good, apparently, long before Arthur ascended the throne. Gildas tells us, specifically, that they "said goodbye, meaning never to return."<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey merely underlines the statement, through repetition: "... the Romans said good-bye and went away, apparently never to return..."; "... the departure of those who has supported the Britons became known, and the fact that they had sworn never to return..."; "The Romans are no longer interested in us, for they have refused to help us in any way at all."<sup>20</sup> **In abandoning Britain, in the eyes of Geoffrey's contemporaries, Rome had renounced her dominion.** Then she had no case in law when she attempted to reassert that dominion in Arthur's time - and none, either, in Geoffrey's. From the point that Rome had turned her back on Britain, as Gildas said she did, as the monk Reformers accepted she had, there was no Imperial dominion over Britain for the Roman Church to inherit.

### **The Nature of History**

The mighty King Arthur of Britain ruled over a Christian country outside the dominion of Rome, a country Rome had abandoned to pagan conquest and which he and his immediate ancestors had rescued by their own efforts. This is the story Geoffrey gave to the Europe of his own day, which accepted it with alacrity. It took many centuries before the Reformers' view, that Geoffrey was a fraud and his Arthur a lie, became the standard historical opinion. Those who held, or still hold it, have never studied Geoffrey's book.

Contempt for Geoffrey as an historian is an anachronistic judgement. The historiographic standards he 'failed' to live up to he could never, in fact, have espoused. For the historiographic ideal in his own period was entirely at odds with our own.

The modern historiographic ideal - like most ideals observed more in the breach - is beautifully summarised by John Morris: "He (the historian) has to sum up like a judge, and decide like a jury. He may not blankly refuse to decide, but he cannot proclaim certainty. He must give an informed opinion on what is probable and improbable and return an open verdict when the balance of evidence suggests no probability. He may not insinuate like an advocate, whose plea that evidence falls

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World*, p30

<sup>19</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 18.3

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, vi.3, pp 147 & 149

short of absolute proof covertly invites his hearers to disbelieve the evidence..."<sup>21</sup>

**But in Geoffrey's period historians were advocates.** History was then a legal matter, and its exponents were out to make a case. Their source documents were not the basis from which they sought to construct a true account of what actually happened, they were witnesses whose testimony they called upon to support that case. Of course some of these documents were forged, just as some witnesses lie in court. But it's not the responsibility of the advocate to admit to the flaws in his own case, that's up to his opponents to point out.

The monk Reformers' response to *The History of the Kings of Britain* is entirely predictable. William of Newburgh denounced Geoffrey as a liar: He had no British book for the British were incapable of writing one. They were too stupid a race to remember their own history, and their story of Arthur was just that, a silly story. The only credible witnesses for this period are Bede and Gildas, who do not mention Arthur. William does not mention Nennius. Why should he? Nennius' testimony does not support his case.

But Nennius' text was well known to Geoffrey's contemporaries. The testimonies of Nennius, Bede and Gildas, taken together, lead logically to Arthur. William of Malmesbury, the greatest historian of his age, had reached that conclusion a decade before Geoffrey wrote. That Bede and Gildas never name the victor of Badon is no kind of evidence against Arthur's existence, as Geoffrey demonstrates.

**The brilliance of Geoffrey's advocacy is that he makes his case by cross-examining hostile witnesses.** His history combines the British historical tradition with the conventional history of his contemporaries, drawn from texts known to all educated men. But his legal case, his refutation of the papacy's claim to lordship over Britain, rests on these standard texts alone. Arthur's existence rests on Bede, Gildas and Nennius. Rome's loss of dominion over Britain, her public renunciation of empire over the island, requires only Gildas.

How could Geoffrey's history be both a serious political tool and a satire, without the one use undermining the other? Geoffrey is an expert propagandist. His history is the wrapping in which his legal case is delivered. Its racy epic style ensured its rapid dissemination. Its satire undermined the claims of his opponents, but it did not undermine Geoffrey's own purpose. He didn't need to convince his readers that his history was true, only that his legal case was valid. And it was: **Gildas' evidence clearly demolished any claim the Roman Church might have to hold Britain as a fief. But that would not have been enough for Robert of Gloucester.**

### **Arthur's Empire**

William the Bastard ruled as king of England and duke of Normandy. On his death his realms were divided, with Robert taking Normandy and William Rufus, England. But they did not remain divided for long. Once Henry had replaced his brother William Rufus on the throne of England he soon found it necessary to take Normandy from Duke Robert. For Normandy was, in the words of R H C Davis, "the key to security in

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<sup>21</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, xv

England”,<sup>22</sup> and it was one of King Stephen’s principal mistakes that he failed to recognise this. His Norman barons, who held land on both sides of the channel, risked finding their feudal loyalties divided and their holdings threatened if King of England were not also Duke of Normandy. When Stephen failed to secure the duchy, they found it “necessary to consider the alternative of the Angevins for both countries.”<sup>23</sup> The same problem would have confronted King Robert.

Henry I was both King of England and Duke of Normandy, and his heir would have to hold both territories if he was to rule securely. A legal defence against Rome’s claims on the English Crown would not have been sufficient for Robert of Gloucester; he would also have needed a disproof of Rome’s claims on his father’s continental possessions. And that also Geoffrey provided.

In Geoffrey’s history Arthur’s dominion is not limited to the island of Britain, it extends way beyond. Having defeated the Saxons, Arthur turns on those other traditional enemies of his people, the Scots and the Picts, and conquers both Albany and Ireland. Ruler now of the entire British Isles, he extends his empire over Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and finally Gaul. It is on his return from Gaul, having settled the government of that country “peacefully and legally”, that Arthur determines to hold a plenary court. He summons his vassals to attend him at Whitsun, and all is prepared for a sumptuous feast. Arthur is at the height of his power. The rulers of all his subject territories are gathered around him on the fourth day of the festival to receive grants and awards at his hands. It is at the point when Arthur is distributing benefices among his loyal clergy, a traditional right of lay rulers which the Reformers, in Geoffrey’s day, had redefined as simony, that envoys from Rome arrive to challenge his right to rule.

The message from Lucius Hiberius and the Senate is read out to the assembled gathering. Arthur must submit himself for judgement in Rome by the middle of August or face a Roman invasion. In conference with his chief vassals Arthur decides on a pre-emptive strike. All immediately return home to muster their forces and a defiant reply is sent back with the Roman envoys. On receiving it Lucius Hiberius is ordered by the senate to summon the kings of the orient in preparation for the conquest of Britain.

Geoffrey lists them: Epistofus, king of the Greeks, Mustensar, king of the Africans, Ali Fatima, king of Spain, Hirtacius, king of the Parthians, Boccus of the Medes, Sertorius of Libya, Serses king of the Iturei, Pandrasus king of Egypt, Micipsa king of Babylon, Politetes duke of Bithynia, Teucer, duke of Phrygia, Evander of Syria, Echion of Boethia, and Ypolitus of Crete. All these countries can be located on an atlas of the ancient world. They were all at some point under Rome’s empire, or Alexander’s. In Geoffrey’s day some were still part of the Byzantine empire. Most had been lost to Islam - a point Geoffrey carefully underlines by naming the king of Spain Ali Fatima. Not one of them was a part of Latin Christendom when Geoffrey wrote.

Those nations that did form Latin Christendom were almost all on Arthur’s side: Hoel of Brittany, Auguselus of Albany, the islands of Ireland, Iceland, Gotland and the Orkneys, Norway and Denmark and the peoples of Gaul, including the Normans, the

<sup>22</sup> R C H Davis, *King Stephen*, p26

<sup>23</sup> R C H Davis, *King Stephen*, p26

Angevins and the Poitevins. This is a war between north and south, and Arthur is victorious. But just as he is about to cross the Alps news is brought to him of Mordred's treachery. The heart of the Roman Empire narrowly escapes another British conquest. But at this point in history, the only area of Latin Christendom still under the authority of Rome, and therefore the only territory over which the Roman church can inherit dominion, is Italy.

There are still writers around today who believe the literate men of the Middle Ages had not the wit to see through the forged Donation of Constantine. Geoffrey's witty response should be evidence enough to demolish that opinion. The Arthur Europe received from Geoffrey was not only an alternative symbol of Christian kingship in opposition to the Reformers' Charlemagne, he was the legal disproof of the papal case for dominion over Latin Christendom, a case based on the 'histories' of the Emperors Charlemagne and Constantine. If Geoffrey's alternative history were credited, then the gift of Constantine could be no inheritance of the medieval papacy, for the Empire of Arthur had long since freed the western world from vassalage.

Of course, this isn't history. And any Dark Age historian will tell you it's all nonsense, and Arthur's continental empire existed nowhere but in Geoffrey's imagination. But that's not how Geoffrey works. His history is humorous, certainly, but the humour detracts nothing from his serious purpose. Geoffrey is constructing a legal case, and Arthur's continental war is a necessary part of that case since Robert could not have held England securely without extending his rule to the Continent. In so far as the Crown of Britain is concerned, that case does not rest on Geoffrey's history or on any lost British source which he might have drawn on. It rests on the history known and accepted by all his educated contemporaries, on the sources promoted by his Reforming opponents. Then the likelihood is that the evidence for Arthur's war on Rome is to be found in the same place, and that Geoffrey himself will direct us where to look for it.

## Chapter 11

### Bede

*Now, since it is evident that these facts are established with historical authenticity by the venerable Bede, it appears that whatever Geoffrey has written, subsequent to Vortigern, either of Arthur, or his successors, or predecessors, is a fiction.*

*William of Newburgh, 1196-8.*<sup>24</sup>

#### Honest Bede

William of Newburgh accused Geoffrey of creating his false history from mere oral tradition, the lying tales of his stupid countrymen. It should have been obvious to William as it is to modern critics that *The History of the Kings of Britain* is largely derived from three known texts, the same that convinced William of Malmesbury that Arthur was an historical personage: Gildas, Nennius and Bede. For Geoffrey's contemporaries the most prominent of these was Bede.

Bede is known even today as the father of English history. The clarity of his Latin, his skills as a chronologer and his judicious use of source material still command respect, and even though his anti-British bias is abundantly evident, no one accuses Bede of fabricating. His reputation stood higher still in Geoffrey's day. Among the treasured sources of England's monk historians, none was more highly prized than Bede. Any history of Arthur's period would have to take *The History of the English Church and People* into account.

Geoffrey takes the bull by the horns. The first paragraph of his introduction directs us to the anti-British texts of Bede and Gildas: He could find nothing about Arthur, he says, or any of the other British kings written anywhere except in the brilliant books that these two made. Any reader following this direction would not, as said, find Arthur, but they would find Badon. Thereafter Geoffrey makes extensive use of Bede, and so conspicuously that anyone familiar with that text would be bound to notice. But he cites him only once, at the very end of the book.

The very last British king of Britain, in Geoffrey's account, is Cadwallader, son of Cadwallo. At the point that Geoffrey introduces him he tells us "this was the youth whom Bede called Cliedvalla."<sup>25</sup> Again it looks as if we are invited to refer to Bede for confirmation of the story Geoffrey tells us. But Bede does not confirm it.

#### The Last King of Britain

Geoffrey's last chapter concerns the tragic downfall of the Britons after Camlann. It is drawn almost entirely from Bede and Gildas, the cast of characters is almost identical - but we are in a completely different play.

<sup>24</sup> *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, preface, trans. Joseph Stevenson *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, xii.14, p280

On Arthur's departure for Avalon five kings rule in succession: They are Gildas' five contemporaneous tyrants, with one substitution; Cuneglasus is replaced by the treacherous Keredic. In this king's disastrous reign the Africans and the Franks conquered the island of Britain and handed over a considerable part of it, called Loegria, to the Saxons.

After this the British were deprived of the right to govern their own kingdom. They no longer had one king ruling over them but were governed by three tyrants, as were their Saxon enemies - the Saxon kings are taken from Bede: Geoffrey names Ethelbert of Kent and Ethelfrid of Northumbria, and the third would be Redwald of East Anglia, the fourth Bretwalda in Bede's list, "who even in the lifetime of Aethelbert was winning pre-eminence for his own people".<sup>26</sup> Both sides engaged in civil wars as well as fighting against each other. It was during this period that Pope Gregory of blessed memory sent Augustine to preach to the Angles who had done away with Christianity in the part of the island they held. The British territories had remained Christian, with seven bishoprics filled by devout prelates and seven abbeys, the greatest of which was Bangor, then ruled by Abbot Dinoot - Dinoot, or Donatus, is abbot of Bangor in Bede's account. When Augustine demanded that the British bishops submit to his authority and join him in preaching to the Angles it was Dinoot who proved to him that the British owed him no allegiance: They already had their own Archbishop, and had no interest in preaching to enemies who persisted in depriving them of their fatherland. This response greatly annoyed King Ethelbert of Kent, who stirred up the rest of the Saxon kings, particularly Ethelfrid of Northumbria, who assembled a huge army to punish Abbot Dinoot and his fellow churchmen. These sought refuge in Chester, where they prayed for the safety of the Christian British. The city was defended by Brochmail, with a much smaller force at his command. After suffering heavy losses he was forced to flee, and Ethelfrid set his soldiery loose on the British religious. Twelve hundred of them won the crown of martyrdom that day.

This was a turning point. Outraged at the mad frenzy of the pagan tyrant, the British leaders came from all directions to oppose Ethelfrid. Having destroyed his army and forced him to flee, they gathered together at Chester to elect a new king of Britain. The unanimous choice was Cadvan, the great-great-grandson of Malgo - Gildas' Maglocunus. King Cadvan immediately set out to destroy Ethelfrid, but just as these two were about to engage in battle, their friends secured a peace deal. The island was partitioned, with Cadvan ruling all Britain south of the Humber, and Ethelfrid north of that divide. In time they became firm friends. When Ethelfrid's discarded wife fled to Cadvan for protection he sought to reconcile her to her husband, but having failed in this, he gave her shelter. She was already pregnant, and at Cadvan's court she gave birth, at the same time as his queen bore him an heir. The two boys, Edwin and Cadwallo, the Saxon and the British prince, were raised together. Years later they inherited their fathers' kingdoms, long remaining close friends. But then Edwin sought Cadwallo's permission to wear a crown and celebrate, in the north, festivities in the same style and pomp as his royal comrade enjoyed in the south. This was an obvious

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<sup>26</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.5



threat to British sovereignty. Reminded by his nephew Brian of the persistent treachery of the Saxons towards their British hosts, Cadwallo refused permission. War ensued. The British king was defeated and driven into exile whilst Edwin cruelly ravaged his kingdom.

Cadwallo retreated to Ireland, from whence he tried repeatedly to return with a fleet of ships. But Edwin was always ready for him - his court magician gave him advance warning of Cadwallo's every move. Almost despairing, Cadwallo fled to his kinsman Salomon of Brittany, and from here he did succeed in landing at the head of a Breton army, but only after Edwin's magician had been assassinated by Brian, who sneaked into Edwin's court disguised as a beggar. The Breton army moved on Exeter, where the British nobles, assembled at Brian's call, were besieged by the Saxon king Peanda of Mercia. The siege was lifted, the Mercians annihilated and their leader captured. Cadwallo marched north. Edwin gathered his forces and, in a field called Hedfield, met Cadwallo in battle and was destroyed with his army. It was now Cadwallo's turn to devastate Edwin's kingdom.

Cadwallo, king of Britain, ruled for forty eight years, his authority extending over all the Saxon kings. The captive Peanda became his ally. He crushed Oswald of Northumbria and extracted a tribute of gold and silver from his successor Oswi. Peanda waged war on Oswi only with Cadwallo's permission. On the defeat and death of Peanda it was Cadwallo who ordered his successor Wulfred to make peace with Oswi. When Cadwallo finally died of old age the Britons embalmed his body and encased it in a bronze statue which they erected on London's west gate, armed and mounted on a bronze horse. His heir was Cadwallader, born of a late union with a sister of Peanda. The lady was only half Saxon. Her mother was a noble woman of the Gewissae - Vortigern's tribe.

Cadwallader ruled Britain bravely and peacefully until, after twelve years, he fell ill. The Britons, in their folly, resumed their habit of civil war, and then came famine, and then plague. The population was devastated, the survivors fled overseas lamenting before God. King Cadwallader sought sanctuary in Brittany with King Alan, the nephew of Salomon. Meanwhile the desolate island of Britain was colonised by fresh waves of Saxons arriving from Germany, and the Britons remaining were too few to oppose them. But the overseas Britons gathered their strength once more, and with Alan's help Cadwallader resolved to retake the island. But just as he was preparing his fleet an Angelic Voice spoke in a peal of thunder and commanded him to cease. God did not want the Britons to regain their country yet. The time that Merlin had prophesied to Arthur had not yet arrived. Before the Britons could regain their land the saints' relics which had once belonged to them must be brought back from Rome and displayed again in Britain. Meanwhile Cadwallader himself must go to Rome, visit Pope Sergius and do penance. The Voice promised he would be numbered among the blessed.

Cadwallader obeyed. On Alan's advice he sent his two sons to rule over the remnant of the Britons in Britain, whilst he himself renounced the world for the sake of the Everlasting Kingdom. He journeyed to Rome, where he received Confirmation at the hands of Pope Sergius, contracted a sudden illness and died. So ended the last

British king of Britain.

In 689 AD, Bede tells us, on the 20th of April, King Caedwalla died still wearing the white robe of baptism. He was baptised on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter, by Pope Sergius, who gave him the baptismal name of Peter. And it was Sergius who ordered the epitaph inscribed on his tomb, beginning:

High in rank and wealth, offspring, and mighty realms,  
Triumphs and spoils, great nobles, cities, halls,  
Won by his forbears' prowess and his own -  
All these great Cadwal left for love of God...<sup>27</sup>

But Bede's Caedwalla is not king of Britain, he is king of the Gewissae, and Gewissae, in Bede's history, is not the name of any British tribe but merely an ancient name for the West Saxons. Geoffrey's last king of Britain, in Bede's account, is not even British.

### **Caedwalla of the Gewissae**

No one who actually studies Geoffrey's text could come away with the idea that he is trying to deceive. He directs his readers to Bede, the standard text for early English history in his day just as in ours. Any reader following his direction could not fail to observe the discrepancies between their two accounts. We are meant to notice. But what are we meant to think?

The medieval historians who do study Geoffrey's work are no longer inclined to dismiss him as a liar or a fantasist. His version of the Caedwalla story is now generally regarded as a joke, and it is no fault of Geoffrey's if the joke misfired. His departures from Bede are so blatant his readers should have known that this was satire, and not been taken in by it. For modern historians have no doubt that Bede's version must be the true one. Caedwalla of the Gewissae is an English king.

But this English king has a British name. In Bede's story it is also the name of the wicked British king who killed the holy Edwin and ravaged Saxon Northumbria - Geoffrey's Cadwallo. In Geoffrey's story Cadwallo is the father of Cadwallader. Not so in Bede. But Bede does not tell us anything of the genealogy of either man. This is his usual practice where British kings are concerned. But his reticence on the Saxon Caedwalla is unusual.

We first meet Caedwalla of the Gewissae in Book IV, chapter 12, in a paragraph concerning the bishops of the West Saxons. During the episcopacy of Leutherius, the fourth bishop, the realm was divided among underkings until Caedwalla defeated and deposed them and took over the kingdom. At this point Bede tells us Caedwalla, during the reign of the said Bishop Leutherius, resigned his earthly power for the sake of the heavenly kingdom and went to end his days in Rome. But he does not tell us who Caedwalla was.

When we next meet him, in Book IV, chapter 15, we learn a little more about him.

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<sup>27</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, V.7

Bede describes him as “a daring young man of the Gewissae, exiled from his own country” who invaded the kingdom of the South Saxons and killed its king, Ethelwalh. Again we are concerned with bishops. Because of its subjugation the kingdom of the South Saxons had no bishop of its own throughout the time of Caedwalla and his successor Ini. But as for Caedwalla, we do not know why he was exiled from his own country, even if we could be sure what his country was. Bede repeats in this chapter what he has told us already, that the Gewissae are the West Saxons. Historians today do not accept this simple equation; nobody knows for certain who the Gewissae were, or what territory they occupied. And this is all Bede is prepared to tell us about Caedwalla’s background.

But it isn’t all he knows. Caedwalla, King of the Gewissae, died in Rome, Bede tells us. He records the epitaph which, on the orders of Pope Sergius, was carved in stone over Caedwalla’s grave. The epitaph describes the king as ‘high in rank’, a ruler of ‘mighty realms... won by his forbears’ prowess and his own’. If Pope Sergius knew Caedwalla was descended from illustrious forbears, then he knew who they were, and so did Bede - but he’s not saying.

It isn’t only Caedwalla’s identity that Bede obscures. The story he tells of Caedwalla’s brief reign actually makes no sense at all. Having made himself King of the Gewissae, Caedwalla subjugated the South Saxons and captured the Isle of Wight, which was then pagan. Caedwalla had sworn that, if victorious, he would dedicate a quarter of the island to God’s use, and he fulfilled this oath by giving that portion over to Bishop Wilfrid. This is Wilfrid of Northumbria, the Roman spokesman at Whitby. What is he doing this far south? What is his connection with Caedwalla? According to Bede he just “chanced” to be visiting the island at this particularly opportune moment.

Yet Wilfrid was no stranger to these parts. Bede has already informed us, in Book IV chapter 13, that during his exile from Northumbria Wilfrid travelled to the land of the South Saxons which he converted from paganism, greatly to the satisfaction of its king, Ethelwalh. Ethelwalh himself was already baptised. And he was the overking of the Isle of Wight. Bede tells us it was given him by his godfather, King Wulfhere of Mercia, “in token of their relationship”.

So Caedwalla, who at this time had not been baptised himself, gave a quarter of the Isle of Wight over to Wilfrid, having killed its previous overlord Ethelwalh, Wilfrid’s one-time ally. And in conjunction with this pious gesture Caedwalla determined - without a word of criticism from Bede - to slaughter the entire native population of the island and replace it with settlers from his own province. Among the victims were two young princes, sons of the deposed king of the island. Before he killed them Caedwalla was persuaded - not by Wilfrid but by Cynibert, abbot of a nearby monastery - to allow the boys to be baptised. Though Caedwalla would not allow them to live, he did allow them to enter the kingdom of heaven, the first natives of the island to believe and be saved. Yet Caedwalla, Wilfrid’s benefactor, was not yet baptised himself.

We do not meet Caedwalla again until his end, in book V, chapter 7. Having ruled his people ably for two years the king abdicated, Bede tells us, because he had

learned - only now - that baptism is the only road to heaven. And having discovered this, he determined to go to Rome for his baptism, and further, to die there shortly after. The historian H P R Finberg tries to make sense of this: Caedwalla had been severely wounded during his attack on the Isle of Wight, and determined to end his days in Rome.<sup>28</sup> Bede does tell us Caedwalla was wounded at one point in his career - he was recovering from his wounds when he received Abbot Cynibert. But would a mortally sick man drag himself from one end of Europe to the other? Would he delay baptism until he reached his destination, believing if he died before he got there he would be condemned to hell? If a Roman baptism were all Caedwalla was after, surely he could have received it at the hands of Wilfrid, Rome's principal spokesman in Britain?

Bede, in any case, does not tell us Caedwalla was a sick man at the point when he abdicated. He says the king simply took it into his head to get baptised in Rome and die there immediately after. The conqueror of Wessex, the South Saxons and the Isle of Wight, abandoning his earthly throne for the sake of the eternal kingdom, abdicated after a reign of only two years and went on a pilgrimage with the fixed intention of dying at the end of it. **Geoffrey's readers were intended to spot the discrepancies between his account and Bede's. I do not think they were intended to conclude that only Geoffrey's account was falsified.** Geoffrey, remember, addressed himself to readers who had had a bellyful of monkish histories with their improbable miracles and their misrepresentation of the world of the fighting man. Who in their right mind, among Geoffrey's target readership, could possibly be taken in by Bede's story of Caedwalla?

### **Caedwalla the Tyrant**

So how did British rule of Britain come to an end? No historian is going to grant any credence to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Whether pseudo-history or satire, his book is not to be taken as a true account of what occurred. For that we must turn to English sources, and especially to Bede.

The consensus is that Caedwalla's conquest of Edwin's Northumbria was the last gasp of independent Britain. Bede records the event in horrified prose: "In a fierce battle on the field called Haethfelth on the twelfth of October in 633, when he was forty eight years old, Edwin was killed, and his entire army destroyed or scattered"; "For a full year Caedwalla ruled the Northumbrian provinces, not as a victorious king but as a savage tyrant, ravaging them with ghastly slaughter"; "Caedwalla, although he professed to call himself a Christian, was utterly barbarous in temperament and behaviour. He was set upon exterminating the entire English race in Britain, and spared neither women nor innocent children, putting them all to horrible deaths with ruthless savagery, and continuously ravaging their whole country. He had no respect for the newly established religion of Christ."<sup>29</sup>

Apart from his utter wickedness we learn very little about the victorious British king from Bede, though on the subject of his English victim he goes into considerable detail. Edwin was the first Christian king of Northumbria, and the fifth English

<sup>28</sup> H P R Finberg, *The Formation of England*, p93

<sup>29</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.20, III.1, II.20

Bretwalda (ruler of Britain), his rule extending over all the peoples of Britain, both English and British, excepting only the Kentish folk - an achievement unmatched, Bede tells us, by any previous English king. He even conquered the Mevanian Isles, that is, Anglesey and Man. But his early years were fraught with peril.

The young Edwin was forced into exile when his kingdom, Deira, was swallowed up by Ethelfrid of Bernicia in the formation of Northumbria. Edwin went in fear of his life, an unknown fugitive for many years through many lands. At length he came to Redwald of the East Angles, who received him openly, whereupon Ethelfrid offered his fellow ruler a choice between two alternatives: murder Edwin and receive a generous payment, or face war.

Redwald, through fear or greed, initially agreed either to kill his guest or deliver him to Ethelfrid's envoys, and this was reported to Edwin by one of his loyal friends who offered to smuggle him to safety. Edwin refused: he could not be the first to break his agreement and Redwald so far had done him no harm. The friend left, and Edwin sat brooding alone in silent torment far into the night. Then a stranger turned up who knew all about his predicament and asked him what reward he would give to one who could deliver him from harm and change Redwald's mind? Any reward in his power, was the reply. What if his deliverer were to promise further to crush his enemies and to give him greater power than any English king before him? Then he would give ample proofs of his gratitude. The third question was, if the man who truthfully foretold these things could give Edwin better and wiser guidance for his life and salvation than anything known to his kinsfolk, would he obey? Edwin promised he would. The stranger gave him a sign by which he would know it was time to honour his promise, and disappeared. Edwin realised he had been talking to a spirit.

All came about as the spirit foretold. Redwald was persuaded by his wife not to sully his honour with so base a betrayal. Instead, he raised an army and defeated Aethelbert, both kings dying in the battle. Edwin thereupon became king of all Northumbria. He ruled for seventeen years, Bede tells us, a Christian king for the last six of them. In 625 he took as his second wife Ethelberga, daughter of Aethelbert of Kent, the king who received Augustine. As a condition of the marriage he agreed to put no barriers in the way of his wife's religion within his kingdom, and indeed to adopt it himself if his advisers recommended it. So the new queen's chaplain, Paulinus, was ordained a bishop by Justus, archbishop of Canterbury, and went with her to the north intent on evangelising the whole region. Now according to the *Historia Brittonum* Paulinus was actually a Briton, Rhun son of Urien, a fact attested by that holiest of bishops, Elvodug, the same man who was responsible for bringing the Welsh Church into conformity with the Roman Easter.<sup>30</sup> But this would contradict Bede's statement that the British made no attempt to evangelise their Saxon neighbours, and no historian is going to accept the word of a later, unreliable British writer against that of so reputable an authority.

Edwin did not immediately convert to the new faith. Bede explains that he was a wise and prudent man who often sat by himself meditating on what would be the best

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<sup>30</sup> Nennius, *British History*, 63

course of action to take. He received a letter from Pope Boniface, urging him to accept baptism, as did his wife, reminding her of her Christian duty to influence her husband in the right direction. Bede replicates both letters. In 626 their baby daughter was baptised in fulfilment of a vow Edwin made on surviving the poisoned dagger of an assassin sent by Cuichelm, King of the West Saxons. Having achieved a God-given victory over those who had plotted his murder, and having discussed the matter fully with his counsellors, and having received that sign from Paulinus which the spirit had long ago instructed him to watch for, Edwin finally agreed to receive baptism. On Easter day the 12th of April 627, the king, his entire nobility and many humbler folk were baptised in York, and the English nation of Northumbria became Christian. Even Coifi, Edwin's chief priest, embraced the new religion, publicly breaking the taboos of his calling and desecrating his own shrine,

So the Christian king Edwin ruled over all the peoples of Britain, and so effectively that a woman with a new born babe could walk across the kingdom from sea to sea without any fear of harm. So great was Edwin's dignity that whenever he went abroad on horseback the royal standard was carried before him, and even when he passed through the streets on foot the standard known as a Tufa preceded him. His bishop, Paulinus, became archbishop of York on the pattern prescribed by Pope Gregory. When Justus, archbishop of Canterbury died it was Paulinus who ordained his successor Honorius.

Pope Honorius - the same who wrote to the Celtic churchmen on the subject of their Pelagian revival - sent his written approval of this action along with a pallium for each archbishop. Bede reproduces these letters, one of them dated: the eleventh day of June, in the twenty-fourth year of the reign of our Lord Heraclius Augustus,<sup>31</sup> the year of our Lord 634. But by this time Edwin was already dead, and Paulinus had fled south with the queen, the royal children and some valuable items from Edwin's treasury. Caedwalla now ruled the north.

Bede has little to tell us of Caedwalla. He destroyed Edwin and both his successors, Osric of Deira and Eanfrid of Bernicia, and held all Northumbria until his death, a year later, at the hands of holy Oswald. That year remained accursed and hateful to all good men at the time Bede wrote, he assures us. Bede, who tells us unblinkingly that Ethelfrid had overrun more British territory than any English king before him, "exterminating or enslaving the inhabitants, making their lands either tributary to the English or ready for English settlement",<sup>32</sup> who compares that pagan king to the biblical Saul and Benjamin and clearly approves his slaughter of twelve hundred British monks, affects to be appalled by Caedwalla's slaughter of the English and his disregard of their newly established faith. Bede makes no attempt to put Caedwalla into any political context. He does not even tell us who Caedwalla was. He calls him a British king. But where was his kingdom?

According to Geoffrey, Edwin's nemesis was the son of Cadvan, king of all Britain. And Cadvan was the great-great-grandson of Malgo "that mighty king of Britain who reigned fourth after Arthur". And Geoffrey had sources. Malgo is clearly Gildas'

<sup>31</sup> Eastern Roman Emperor from 610 to 641 AD.

<sup>32</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, I.34

Maglocunus. His descendants are recorded in the genealogy of the kings of Gwynedd, still extant in a manuscript known as Harleian MS No. 3859.<sup>33</sup> Bede's wicked Caedwalla, Geoffrey's Cadwallo, is there named Catgollaun of Gwynedd and Anglesey, and he really was a descendant of the man Gildas described as the mightiest British ruler of his day. From a British perspective the evil British tyrant was simply reclaiming his birthright. We would never have learned this if all we had to go on was Bede. But that doesn't mean Bede didn't know it.

### **A Chosen People**

Modern historians still have a huge respect for Bede. His historiography and his careful use of a wide range of sources are surprisingly modern. But Bede did not write a modern history. His motives are of his own age: like Geoffrey, he is making a case.

In Geoffrey's day, almost four hundred and fifty years, by his calculation, after they had lost the crown of Britain, the British had not renounced their claim to the regions occupied by the Saxons. Bede wrote less than a hundred years after a British tyrant, in his account, had attempted to extirpate his own race from a land they had but recently settled. He lived in a country whose ownership was disputed by two races, and his history was an assertion of legitimacy. Against the British claim to be the original, rightful, Christian rulers of a land stolen from them by treacherous pagan mercenaries who had broken their oath of allegiance, Bede maintained that God had given this country to his people. The formation of England was the will of God.

His argument is based on Gildas, and Gildas derived his from the Old Testament. Gildas preached that the congenital sin of the Britons would bring down on them the punishment of military defeat, as it had in the past. Gildas defines his countrymen as a latter-day Israel. When they strayed from the true path God had punished them, just as he did the Israelites of old. The barbarian raids, the plagues and famines, their own stupid blindness in inviting in the Saxons who rebelled against them with such devastating results, were inflicted on them as a consequence of their sins, but with the intention of correcting these faults, just as the Israelites were returned to the true worship of God by the horror of foreign conquest. As the Jewish exiles lamented beside the waters of Babylon, so the British exiles as they left their native shore sang psalms instead of sea shanties: "you have given us like sheep for eating and scattered us among the heathen".<sup>34</sup> It was God who strengthened the survivors who gathered around Ambrosius Aurelianus, and when the battle went first this way then that, God was trying his people, as He tends to, to see whether they loved Him or no. And then there was the victory of Badon.

In the aftermath of Badon the British did reform, Gildas tells us. For a full generation the chastened people kept to their proper stations. But that generation has died, and been succeeded by one which has not suffered those trials and corrections. It is because they remember only the calm of the present that the British of Gildas' day are, with very few exceptions, rushing headlong to hell.

Bede takes his cue from Gildas. His book is titled *A History of the English Church*

<sup>33</sup> Reproduced in *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 5

<sup>34</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 25.1

*and People* but he does not begin with the coming of the English. He begins, like Gildas, with the coming of Rome. For the first part of his history, right up to the victory of Badon, Gildas is his pattern and his principal source. But Gildas' history is nonsense, and Bede could well have known that. Certainly he had better sources. Thanks to them he is able to include fragments of the actual history of Roman Britain, naming names, explaining events - right up to the letter to Aëtius who, he tells us, was unable to respond to the British request for aid because he was engaged in a mighty struggle with the Huns, who threatened all Europe. He then moves on to transcribing Gildas' garbled account of how the wicked Britons brought ruin on themselves by indulging in every vice so that, blinded by God's wrath, they sent an invitation to the Saxons whom God had destined to be their scourge. Bede names the British king, Vortigern, and the Saxon leaders, Hengist and Horsa, and inserts a paragraph on the various English nations who eventually came to settle in Britain, before proceeding rapidly to the Saxon revolt, the British revival under Ambrosius Aurelianus, Last of the Romans, and Badon.

Badon is the last named event in Bede's history of Roman Britain. Having reached it, he doubles back to give an account of Germanus' mission against the British Pelagians - by far the longest section in his pre-Saxon history - before returning to the aftermath of Badon and the Britons' total moral collapse as witnessed and recorded by their own historian Gildas.

Gildas is Bede's source, his pattern, and his witness. By their wickedness the British had provoked God's wrath. Gildas tells us so. And Gildas warned that military defeat would be the consequence. By the time Bede is writing the Britons had suffered defeat. At the end of his book he tells us that they have a national hatred of the English, but "are powerless to obtain what they want." What the British wanted, clearly, was the restoration of their dominion. They were powerless to obtain it, Bede tells us, because "they are opposed by the power of God and man alike".<sup>35</sup>

The punishment of military defeat, in Gildas' sermon, was the means by which God herded the Britons back to the true path. But this post-Badon defeat, according to Bede, was not sent by God to correct the sins of the British, but to permanently end their dominion over the island. While Gildas' Britons are compared to the Israel of the Babylonian captivity, in Bede they are like the Jews after the crucifixion, they have lost forever the divine favour they once enjoyed. As the Christians replaced the Jews in God's favour, so the English replaced the British. They are His new chosen people.

The statement comes at the end of Bede's borrowings from Gildas. After relating the story of Germanus he returns us to Badon, and its aftermath. To the unspeakable crimes of the Britons, remembered with sorrow by their own historian Gildas, he adds one more: They did not preach the faith to the English. Thus even the destruction of Christianity in the areas of their country lost to the invader is, in Bede's story, laid at the door of the wicked Britons themselves. And meanwhile "God in his goodness did not utterly abandon the people whom he had chosen; for he remembered them, and sent this nation more worthy preachers of truth to bring them to the Faith." That story, Augustine's mission to Aethelbert's Kent, is the next item in Bede's narrative.

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<sup>35</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, V.23



Bede gives us an approximate date for Badon, derived from *The Ruin of Britain*. He thought Gildas was saying the battle was fought about forty four years after the Saxon Advent, and he dates that event to the reign of the Emperor Marcian, who, he holds, became co-Emperor with Valentinian in 449 and ruled for seven years. So according to Bede, Badon was fought between 493 and 500 AD. For the Kent mission Bede has an exact date: Pope Gregory sent the missionaries in 596, and they arrived in 597. Between the two events there is a period of one hundred years - in which Bede has nothing to say.

Had he no sources? He had Gildas. Gildas doesn't end with Badon. He takes us bang up to date, to the point when his text was written, describing the political situation in his day and even naming five contemporary kings, all displeasing to God, but most especially Maelgwn of Gwynedd, Dragon of the Island, "higher than almost all the generals of Britain" "more profuse in giving, more extravagant in sin". Bede no longer follows him.

Bede's English history proper starts with the Gregorian mission. He tells us Aethelbert of Kent, who received Augustine, held Empire over all the south of Britain, the third English king to have done so. Fourth was Redwald of the East Angles, who was winning pre-eminence even in the lifetime of Aethelbert. Fifth was Edwin, who held Northumbria after Ethelfrid. Sixth was Oswald, who mastered Edwin's realm a year after his death. Seventh was Oswald's brother and heir, Oswy. The English overkings follow each other in succession after Aethelbert. There are two who precede him. The second, Ceawlin of the West Saxons, is in the later genealogies of Wessex made a grandson of Cerdic, the founder of the dynasty. Ceawlin was Aethelbert's contemporary: the two fought, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in 568. And it is from the chronicle that we learn Aelle of the South Saxons, the first on Bede's list, landed in Britain in 477. Between the dominance of Aelle and of Ceawlin is a gap of almost a century. In this crucial period Bede lists only two English Bretwaldas and beyond their exalted status he has nothing to tell us about either of them.

Other Saxon writers had sources for the period. We learn something of the collapse of independent Britain from the Anglo-Saxon chronicle. The expansion of Wessex destroyed Britain's grip on the fertile lowlands of the south west. At that time the British were weakened, we know, by a devastating plague which swept through the Roman world. This was a major event, but Bede never mentions it. Was there no record of it in his Roman sources? What of the Irish? The debt Northumbrian scholarship owed to Irish teachers is everywhere apparent and is admitted by Bede himself. The plague is recorded in Irish annals.

Bede has nothing even of how the British dominion over Northumbria, his own country, was brought to an end. He opens with Ethelfrid, who ravaged the Britons more cruelly than any king before him. The struggles between Ethelfrid and Edwin, Ethelfrid and Redwald, Edwin and Cuichelm are all recorded. But as for the British kingdoms of the north, and the battles which destroyed them and allowed Saxon Northumbria to come into existence, nothing. Even in the account of Aethelferth's southern invasion, his slaughter of the faithless Britons at Chester including the twelve hundred Bangor

monks, we are given no clue as to who, precisely, he was fighting. So rigorously does Bede exclude any political understanding of the Britons that Edwin's nemesis, the wicked Caedwalla, appears to spring out of nowhere.

Bede did have sources, his use of which still commands respect today. Though it is thought he never left his own monastery of Jarrow, where he was placed as a boy, he acquired material for writing his history from as far away as the papal archives - through a London priest, Nothelm, he tells us, who whilst in Rome was allowed to make copies of relevant letters for him. Clearly he was not only a capable scholar, he was a resourceful researcher. It is not likely that there was a hundred year gap in his knowledge. But there is a hundred year gap in his history.

Of course Bede does not have to tell us what happened in this period. He is not pretending to write a modern history. Like Geoffrey, and like Gildas, he is making a case, and just as Gildas is free to omit Constantine III since it didn't suit his case to include him, so **Bede is free to omit a hundred years of British history, and just leave a gap, if that suits him.**

**But then we cannot but conclude that the history of this century, in its entirety, is inimical to the case Bede is making.**

### **Lying Tales**

If Geoffrey's readers turned to Bede to confirm his story of the British hero Arthur and his continental empire they would not find it. What they would find is a gap. And they would not necessarily draw the same conclusions from the existence of that gap as today's Dark Age historians.

Of course there are twelfth-century writers whose views align precisely with the current consensus. Bede was the father of English history in Geoffrey's day as much as in ours, and Richard Barber's argument, that the gap in the British historical record is what called Arthur into being, is merely a restatement of William of Newburgh's accusation, that the Britons had no heroic past but had merely invented one. Geoffrey of Monmouth, by writing in Latin, had passed off their lying tales as genuine history. William, in his preface, discounts the testimony of that fraudulent historian and directs his readers instead to honest Bede, and to his source Gildas, where the truth about that faithless, cowardly race is plainly exposed. But Bede and Gildas were both monks.

William's contempt for oral history agrees with the modern view but it is not likely to have been shared by Geoffrey's target readership. Geoffrey addressed himself to laymen, specifically to laymen who objected to the growing power of the monks. They would have been acutely aware of one pertinent fact which tends to be overlooked by today's Dark Age historians: the argument that history must be based on the written record is effectively to say, in this case, that only the Church's version of history is valid.

Geoffrey's period is known as the twelfth-century renaissance. It is marked by an increased openness to new ideas and by the spread of literacy even to the laity. Nobles like Waleran of Mellent and Robert of Gloucester were not only patrons of educated men, they were educated men themselves. Henry I was praised for

educating even his daughters. But this was recent. For centuries before this time literacy and learning had been kept alive in the monasteries, which is to say that the written record had been a monopoly of the Church. Lay history had been oral - stories, in fact, like the Charlemagne cycle. To a twelfth-century lay readership Geoffrey's statement in his preface, that the deeds of the kings of Britain, and of Arthur, had been preserved in oral memory which was just as reliable as a book, would not have appeared ridiculous.

Besides which, Geoffrey's educated, literate readers would have been aware that his was not actually the first written history to name Arthur.

## Chapter 12

### Nennius

*There is a blank in British history in the early sixth century; and history abhors a vacuum.*

Richard Barber, 1972.<sup>36</sup>

*I, Nennius, pupil of the holy Elvodug, have undertaken to write down some extracts that the stupidity of the British cast out; for the scholars of the island of Britain had no skill, and set down no record in books. I have therefore made a heap of all that I have found...*

*Preface to the Historia Brittonum, author & date disputed.<sup>37</sup>*

#### The Historia Brittonum

Geoffrey is widely credited with writing Arthur into the gap in British history, but actually we know that a decade before *The History of the Kings of Britain* the greatest historian of the age held the Britons' champion to be a genuinely historical person. William of Malmesbury, in his *Gesta Regum*, declared that Ambrosius, last of the Romans, had checked the barbarian invaders "through the distinguished achievements of the warlike Arthur." He arrived at this conclusion from a study of respectable Latin documents: Bede and Gildas tell us the British resistance under Ambrosius culminated at Badon, and the *Historia Brittonum* tells us that victory was Arthur's. Leader in battle, that text terms him, and so William deduced that Arthur fought under the authority of Ambrosius, who was king after Vortigern. But 'Nennius' says no such thing.

It is remarkable just how little the writer of the *Historia* does say about Arthur. He tells us Arthur fought the Saxons, but all he gives us is a list of battles. There's no link with Ambrosius, political or genealogical. Indeed there's no genealogical information on Arthur at all in the body of the text, although in the section on marvels we are told he had a son, Amir. This is the more surprising as his account of Arthur's campaigns opens with a genealogical statement, that Otha succeeded his father Hengest, and from him all subsequent kings of the Kentishmen are descended, yet gives us nothing at all on Arthur's descendants or his origins. There's no clue as to how Arthur came to power, or how he met his end, no mention of Camlann, no British opposition fomenting civil war. In the case of Vortigern, 'Nennius' manages to put him immediately into context with a few choice phrases - we know exactly what he was up against. But as for Arthur's political situation, we are left completely in the dark.

There is nothing here to back Geoffrey's story of Arthur's war with Rome. Yet the *Historia Brittonum* is clearly a part of Geoffrey's case, for he very carefully draws our

<sup>36</sup> *The Figure of Arthur*, p17

<sup>37</sup> trans. John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 8

attention to that work. Not that Geoffrey cites Nennius, for all the use he makes of that history. Instead, he cites Gildas.

Geoffrey introduces the name Nennius in his first citation of Gildas, on the renaming of the ancient city of London. Called Troia Nova at its foundation, its more familiar name derives from King Lud, a contemporary of Julius Caesar, who determined the British capital should be named for himself, Kaerlud, Lud's city. His action was opposed, Geoffrey tells us, by his brother Nennius, who was annoyed that the King of Britain should wish to do away with the name of Troy in his own country. But since the eloquent Gildas has already dealt with that matter, Geoffrey will say no more. He then returns us to the main narrative, the original founding of the city by Brutus the Trojan, who at that time also gave a code of laws to the people. This happened, Geoffrey tells us, when the priest Eli was ruling in Judea and the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. As said, none of this comes from Gildas, but neither is it pure invention. This time-fix is taken, word for word, from the *Historia Brittonum*, where it concludes the account of the first king of Britain. This, in the same paragraph that the name Nennius is used, is clearly no coincidence. Geoffrey is referring us to that text.

It is the *Historia Brittonum* claiming Nennius' authorship that Geoffrey directs us to, and this is important. Dark Age historians now prefer to drop the Nennius attribution on the grounds that this isn't the only preface attached to the work. Some have no preface. Some claim Gildas as the author. One, found in the Vatican, claims to be the work of a British bishop and anchorite named Marcus.

Nora Chadwick traced this man. In *Studies in the Early British Church* she shows that among the group of Celtic scholars who played so prominent a part in the Carolingian renaissance there was one named Marcus, a Briton described as a monk and an anchorite, once a bishop in his native land. We can date him: Heiric of Auxerre tells us he was a "holy old man" in 873. Then as the *Historia* has been 'securely dated' to 829-30 he could just have been the author, but Chadwick thinks not. She suggests rather that he edited the work, interpolating into it the legend of Germanus and Vortigern. In her day it was usual to accept the more frequently occurring attribution, that of Nennius.

For curiously there was a British scholar of that name operating in exactly the right period. But let us for the sake of argument accept the current consensus that neither the *Historia* nor the Nennius preface were written by a ninth-century Nennius. The name, in any case, is not the issue. The reason for discounting the Nennius preface as an original and genuine introduction to the history, as David Dumville explains, is that its author's claim to have "made a heap" of his sources has misled incompetent scholars like John Morris into thinking they could treat the work as a collection of earlier, unedited texts. This hardly does justice to Morris' historiographical method, and it entirely misses the real significance of this preface. The claim which so exercises today's historians is not the only one which 'Nennius' makes.

### The Nennius Preface

We must understand the sources, motives and technical terminology of each of our writers, Dumville reminds us. Every writer does have a motive, forgers are no exception to the rule. If the Nennius preface was not written by the author of the *Historia* that doesn't mean we can discard it, for Geoffrey draws our attention to the name: It is a part of his case.

That case opens with the first line of the preface, which runs: "I, Nennius, pupil of the holy Elvodug, have undertaken to write down some extracts that the stupidity of the British cast out; for the scholars of the island of Britain had no skill, and set down no record in books." This sentence flatly contradicts itself. If the British had not the skill to make a written record, then they cannot have had one to 'cast out'. The two statements are clearly by separate hands. We can make sense of this dual authorship. John Morris, in the preface to his translation of the *Historia Brittonum*, explains that medieval writers habitually wrote comments in the margins or between the lines of documents and later copyists transcribed these comments into the body of later texts. The interpolations can usually be distinguished from the original: "They are most easily recognised in explanatory phrases beginning *id est*, or *quae est*, ('that is' or 'which is'), especially when such phrases interrupt the flow or grammatical structure of the sentence in which they occur." The phrase in question begins *quia*, 'for'. It does not interrupt the flow or grammatical structure of the sentence, it counters its meaning, and this is clearly deliberate.

So we have two voices, one unattributed, denying the existence of a British record, another claiming to be Nennius the pupil of holy Elvodug striving to preserve a record recently discarded. In the very first sentence of the Nennius preface we are already in the middle of a propaganda battle, the same dispute in which Geoffrey himself was engaged. Geoffrey sought to clear the reputation of his people from the charge of illiteracy and stupidity. And so did the real Nennius.

It is on record that there was a real Nennius, at exactly the right time to have written the *Historia*. A document called the *Oxoniensis Prior*, dated to 820, contains an alphabet supposedly created on the spur of the moment by 'Nemninus' in order to refute a charge of illiteracy levelled against his race by a Saxon scholar. Robert Graves says this improvised alphabet is a cryptogram requiring a knowledge of Greek to resolve, and that it was designed to demonstrate the infinite superiority of British over Anglo-Saxon scholarship. It is more generally regarded as a joke; Nennius refutes the Saxon scholar's accusation with a pretended British alphabet which is actually based on Saxon runes.

The real Nennius was literate even in the language of his enemies - he knew Saxon runes. The writer of the *Historia Brittonum* also demonstrates a knowledge of the English language: His account of Hengest's massacre of the British nobles contains a Saxon pun: "*Eu Saxones, enimitit saxas*" - "Saxons, draw your knives". The language of the Nennius preface, as Richard Barber points out, is remarkably similar to that found in the *Oxoniensis Prior*.<sup>38</sup> The forger of the Nennius preface is no fool. He

<sup>38</sup> see Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p86

fathers the *Historia* on a man who really could have written it. And he draws our attention to another: Holy Elvodug.

There really was an Elvodug. He appears twice in the *Welsh Annals*. In 768 “Easter is changed among the Britons, Elfoddw servant of God, emending it”, and in 809 “Elfoddw archbishop of the Gwynedd region went to the Lord”. Again the time is right, the Nennius who wrote in the 820s could have been a pupil of an Elfoddw who died in 809. But we have agreed to accept the current consensus, the writer of the preface is not Nennius pupil of Elfoddw. Then the forger had some reason for drawing our attention to this man, the bishop who brought the Welsh church into conformity with the Roman Easter. And he names him in the very sentence in which he claims a British record was deliberately destroyed. This is the really significant claim in the Nennius preface, that a British written record was destroyed at exactly the time when the Welsh church finally surrendered to the Roman.

But the preface is a forgery. The forger claims a British record was destroyed but we do not know when he made this claim nor can we date the interpolation which flatly denies it. However we can date the dispute over the British written record - to the early ninth century! The charge of illiteracy was levelled against the British of that period. The real Nennius was engaged in defending his people against the insult, and so was the writer of the *Historia*.

The unknown writer of this early British history begins his account with Brutus the Trojan. This is where Geoffrey got the story from, as his educated contemporaries would certainly be aware. But whereas in Geoffrey’s book the tale resounds to the glory of his people, portraying them as the genetic equals of Rome with an equally glorious future prophesied for them, in this ninth-century history the tale is directed against the Britons. The writer tells us it comes from no British record, but is an invention of their enemies. “This is the genealogy of that Brutus the Hateful, who has never been traced to us”.<sup>39</sup>

Brutus the Hateful was a child of doom, accursed before his birth. A wizard had warned his father Silvius, grandson of Aeneas, whilst the boy was still in his mother’s womb that he would slay both his parents and be hateful to all men. And so it came to pass. His mother died giving birth to him, and he killed his father accidentally with an arrow shot whilst playing. And so the lad was forced into exile.

The writer of the *Historia* repeats the tale whilst disowning it. “This genealogy is not written in any book of Britain” he tells us, it came from “the Annals of the Romans”. The logical eponymous ancestor of the Britons would be something like Britto, as our writer observes, twice substituting this name for that of Brutus in his narrative. Brutus, as said, signifies beastlike. The Brutus legend was a Roman invention, an “insult of the Romans, that they unjustly twist against us”.<sup>40</sup> In Geoffrey’s hands the story has been radically remodelled, but Brutus the Hateful, slayer of his noble Roman parents, began life as a species of black propaganda directed against the Britons by their racial enemies. William of Newburgh’s abusive pun, *bruti Britones*, was already four centuries old when he coined it.

<sup>39</sup> Nennius, *British History*, 10

<sup>40</sup> Nennius, *British History*, contents, iii

In the ninth century, just as in Geoffrey's day, the Romans and the Saxons, Britain's enemies, insisted there was no British record because the British were too *bruti* to have produced one. The writer of the Nennius preface states that there was such a record, but that it was deliberately destroyed when the Welsh church capitulated to the Roman. Clearly someone is lying.

### **The British Record**

Either there was, or there was not, a British written record before the *Historia*. Dark Age historians habitually accept the Roman version of the story. There is no surviving British record because the British failed to create one. Deprived of Rome's guiding hand Independent Britain proved incapable, in isolation, of maintaining the fruits of progress and discipline. A backwash of Celticism over the more civilized areas reduced Britannia to sub-Roman Britain as the province collapsed into a political and intellectual vacuum. In the aftermath of Rome's departure we find Britons writing theological tracts in a clear, elegant Latin style. A century later knowledge itself had been wiped out of men's minds, as Gildas' ignorance testifies.

Of course this is nonsense. Gildas' errors are not even proof of his own ignorance, let alone of the entire nations'. But Gildas is evidence of something else. His sermon is a written work, he expected others to be able to read it. He expected more than that: He expected a riposte. Prefacing his summary of quotations from the prophets which, he claims, support his attack on the five tyrants, is this: "These oracles will form a reliable and beautiful covering for the endeavour of my little work, to protect it from the rain-showers of the hostile that will compete to beat upon it."<sup>41</sup> So where are they, these rain-showers of the hostile? Surely someone among Gildas' literate public spoke up for the rulers of Britain. Had they no tame propagandists? That would be unusual.

We have, now, hard evidence that 'the skills of reading and writing were handed down in a non-religious context' in sixth-century Britain, in the shape of the Arthur Stone. As for the religious context, the British church was the parent of the Irish church, and the Irish church was the university of Dark Age Europe. Is it likely that, while Irish scholars were teaching the English their letters their mother church in Britain had forgotten the art? Even though Bede tells us Augustine, on his 'mission' to the British Church, met with "seven bishops and many very learned men"?<sup>42</sup>

There were very learned Britons at the start of the seventh century, and again at the start of the ninth. Robert Graves says Nemninus' alphabet was designed to demonstrate that, so far from being illiterate, the learned British were streets ahead of their English counterparts. The Greek cryptogram Graves sees in the Nemninus alphabet has not been spotted by anyone else, but it is a fact that the ninth-century British did create cryptograms requiring a knowledge of Greek for their resolution.

Nora Chadwick suggests the court of Merfyn Vrych of Gwynedd was particularly associated with the cultivation of Latin-Greek cryptographic material,<sup>43</sup> and gives the

<sup>41</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 37.2

<sup>42</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.2.

<sup>43</sup> Nora Chadwick, *Early Culture and Learning in North Wales*, in *Studies in the Early British Church*, p99.



example of a cryptogram put to visiting Irish scholars at Merfyn's court. Resolved by substituting Greek letters for the Latin according to a fixed table, it read "Mermin rex Conchen salutem", "Merfyn the king greets Concenn" - the opening words of a letter from the king of Gwynedd to his brother-in-law, the king of Powys. Both puzzle and solution survive, because both were written down and sent by visiting Irish scholars to their teacher, Colgu, so that others of their school would not risk the humiliation of being publicly defeated by it.

Are we really to credit that British scholars of the ninth century were literate in Latin, Greek and in some cases even English, yet only shortly before the race was illiterate? It hardly seems likely. Someone is lying, and it doesn't take any great powers of deduction to work out who, and why.

The writer of the Nennius preface may not be giving us his true name, but he is surely telling the truth about the written history of his people. As the Britons were not too stupid to create a written record, there must have been one, but it didn't survive. In the eighth century the British church finally capitulated to Rome. By then, we know, written records in the Celtic world were preserved in the monasteries. The British record was now in Rome's hands, and she was in a position to order a purge. The Nennius preface tells us that the Britons themselves, in their stupidity, cast out that record - doubtless partisans of the Roman cause; holy Elvodug is not likely to have been acting alone. This is precisely as we would expect, once we dismiss the modern fairy tale of the 'reunion of Christian brothers'. Rome said the Celtic Christians were heretics, and Rome always made a point of destroying the written record of heretics.

But destroying this record was not enough. By spreading the black legend of British illiteracy, a legend which continues to influence modern scholarship, Rome denied this record had ever existed, even that it ever could have existed. Which surely suggests there was something in that record Rome wanted forgotten - badly.

### **The Gap in History**

To understand what Geoffrey is saying we have always to remember that he is not addressing a modern audience. The modern view of Arthur's period is an inheritance from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, whose philosophers held the same low opinion of the Celtic races as the monk-theologians of the Papal Reformation. But Geoffrey was a British patriot addressing himself particularly to that Reformation's opponents. Geoffrey's target readership, observing the gap in the British record, would not be seeing the same thing as today's Dark Age historians.

To the Dark Age historians it seems obvious that the blank in British history must be the fault of the Britons themselves, just as the Reformers claimed. And when the Britons fill in that blank with a heroic past remembered by no other nation, the Dark Age historians agree with the Reformers that they must be lying. Richard Barber suggests it was the gap itself which called Arthur into being: As it enabled the modern champions of Camelot, so it had inspired the *bruti* Britons before them to project their own improbable fantasies into that unresisting hole. But where did the hole come from?

History must be based on the written record. But this gap is part of the record, and as much as any other part of the record it requires interpretation. Arthur's absence from history cannot be made to explain why a literate people failed to leave a record of just this critical period, the period of British rule of Independent Britain. But Arthur's one-time existence might explain it. What if Arthur, revered by his people as a Christian champion against pagans, were actually a Pelagian, a heretic in Rome's eyes? Most of his people were right up to Bede's day and beyond - as any contemporary reader of Geoffrey's history would know.

The Roman Church of Geoffrey's day was losing her monopoly on the written record, and her claim to be the only True Church, and the sole conduit of God's Grace, was also under threat. This was a period of growing heresy. In the Languedoc, the Cathars were proclaiming that the Roman Church was a church of the Devil. In the east, crusaders were coming into contact with the Greek Orthodox Church, which also disputed the papacy's claims. In Wales, a medieval Life of St. David claims that he received his pallium, not from the Pope, but from the Archbishop of Jerusalem. And any educated man could read for himself, in Bede's history, that the Britons of his day had denied Rome the authority she claimed for herself, and maintained a separate, independent, organised British Church.

In a world in which the Frankish people, preservers and inheritors of Rome's empire, were being encouraged by the Roman Church to make war on the *bruti* Britons, Geoffrey's story of Arthur would make perfect sense. And it makes sense still. That there really was an Arthur, champion of Pelagian Britain, is the likeliest explanation for the record that has come down to us.

But the likeliest explanation for the data is not enough. Arthur, heretic emperor, must be found in the contemporary written record if his existence is to be accepted. And the contemporary written record, so far as Britain is concerned, comprises just one text, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*.

## Chapter 13

### Gildas

*Nothing deceives like a document.*

*Sir William Stephenson, intelligence agent, 20th century*

#### **The Sons of Mordred**

Of the three texts which underlay Arthurian history in Geoffrey's day, only one is still standing. The *Historia Brittonum* has taken its place among the rest of British tradition as historically worthless for any study of the period. Bede, though an excellent historian, is too late an authority to have anything valid to say about the fifth and sixth centuries. The only historical source for this era is the sole surviving contemporary text, Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*.

Gildas' sermon was the foundation of the English view of Arthurian Britain in Geoffrey's day, just as in ours. Bede's story rests entirely on Gildas' authority: The wicked Britons under Roman leadership won a notable victory over the pagan invaders but proved unworthy to enjoy its fruits. The wickedness of the Britons becomes, in modern parlance, political incompetence. Roman Britain degenerated into sub-Roman Britain as the natives proved themselves unable to maintain the progress and discipline bequeathed them by the Empire. The legitimate Roman administration was replaced by warlords whose endemic violence ultimately destroyed their own society. Gildas, no longer a prophet, is now viewed as a shrewd political commentator who correctly analysed the evils of his own society and tried to warn of their inevitable consequences.

Geoffrey presents a very different view. The final chapter of his history is taken almost entirely from Bede and Gildas. It begins with the first of Gildas' five tyrants, Constantine of Dumnonia. Whelp of the filthy lioness of Dumnonia, Gildas addresses him in his exile: "I know full well you are still alive, and I charge you as though you were present..."<sup>44</sup> At the root of Constantine's sins is the fact that he put away his lawful wife, which act somehow gave rise to the crimes of parricide and sacrilege. We have no details on the parricide, but as for the sacrilege, Constantine had bound himself by oath not to harm two royal youths, but then he slew them in church, at the altar, in front of their own mother.

In Geoffrey's story Constantine is Arthur's cousin, the son of Cadur King of Cornwall, and the rightful King of Britain. Immediately he is raised to the throne the two sons of Mordred with their Saxon allies rebel against him. Defeated, the youths flee to sanctuary, one to the church of St. Amphibalus in Winchester, the other to a friary in London. Constantine, having forced the Saxons into submission, catches up with them both in turn and slays them, in each case, before the altar.

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<sup>44</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 29.1

Honest Gildas, Gildas the wise, is the verdict on this writer among his fellow monks from Bede through to William of Newburgh, and Dark Age historians today continue in the same tradition. Geoffrey introduces us to a very different Gildas. His Gildas is not merely a useless historian with an appalling Latin style, he is a traitor to his own race. Gildas' veneration for the Romans is evident in every line of his historical section, and it is the Romans, in Geoffrey's history, who precipitate Arthur's fall. Arthur's absence on the Continent, responding to Rome's challenge to his rule, allows enemies at home their opportunity. After Camlann these dissident Britons continue their revolt against his legitimate successor Constantine - and Gildas is on the side of the rebels.

Of course Dark Age historians know Geoffrey is making it up. The two youths slain by Constantine are not the sons of Mordred. But then, who are they? And why did Constantine kill them? Did the two youths rebel against his rule? Gildas tells us they fought: "Their arms were stretched out not to weapons - though almost no man handled them more bravely than they at this time".<sup>45</sup> But he does not tell us whom they fought against.

Gildas, who has nothing but praise for the youths, condemns King Constantine in the most intemperate language. Dark Age historians unhesitatingly accept his judgement as valid. But what is it that renders Gildas' judgement so far above reproach? For most of what he has to say about his contemporaries he is our sole witness, his story confirmed by no other report. Where we do have a check on him, as we do for most of historical section, it turns out that in every case Gildas story is false. Historians excuse this. Gildas' errors are no fault of his, he did the best he could. His history is nonsense because, in the degenerate sub-Roman Britain of his day, there were no written sources available to him. And how do we know that? Because Gildas says so!

Dark Age historians are remarkably willing to let our solitary witness vouch for himself. Gildas is an honest patriot, berating his contemporaries from the best possible motives. He says so himself: "my intentions are kindly". This vituperative sermon is wrung from him only after much reflection "my thoughts, like joint debtors, kept checkmating each other". But after ten years of holding his peace can no longer keep silent, now, "spurred on by my own thoughts and the devout prayers of my brethren", he must oppose this "rope of congenital sin that has been stretched far and wide for so many years together". Duty forces Gildas to denounce his race as congenitally evil, but let no one imagine he is any less a patriot: "No, I sympathise with my country's difficulties and rejoice in remedies to relieve them".<sup>46</sup> **Historians today are convinced by his protestations. Geoffrey is not, and he intends his readers to share his opinion.**

**Geoffrey addresses himself to lay readers who have had enough of monk historians.** Twelfth-century monks condemned the violence of the knights, a violence necessitated by their position. And Gildas the monk condemns the violence of the five tyrants. These were military men: fighting was their job, their duty to their families, their followers, their heirs. Should Constantine have allowed himself to be driven meekly

<sup>45</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 28.2

<sup>46</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 1.1, 1.15, 1.16, 1.14, 1.1

from his throne? Should Aurelius Caninus, “left like a solitary tree, withering in the middle of the field”<sup>47</sup> after his father and his brothers have been slain, have allowed their deaths to go unavenged and surrendered his lands to those who slew them? Could Cuneglasus, “you bear, rider of many and driver of the chariot of the Bear’s Stronghold”, who waged war “against... our countrymen, with arms special to yourself”,<sup>48</sup> have held onto his stronghold had he disarmed? And what of “the first in evil”, Maglocunus, dragon of the island, who slew his own uncle and in remorse turned monk? Wickedly he has left his monastery and returned to the throne, to secular life and to marriage, “like some sick hound to your disgusting vomit”.<sup>49</sup> This is not an analogy likely to find favour with Geoffrey’s target readership.

Dark Age historians regard Gildas as a decent patriot resorting to strong language in his efforts to warn his fellow countrymen. Geoffrey’s Gildas is no impartial, wise observer, he is a partisan. The modern opinion is that Gildas’ sermon condemned Britain’s descent into civil war, that he sought to check the “lawlessness of the laity” which finally destroyed their own country. In Geoffrey’s story Gildas’ tyrants are the rightful rulers of Britain, defending the throne from attempted usurpation - the only fomenter of civil strife he admits is Keredic, a king not on Gildas’ list. In the view of historians today there is no question that Gildas’ victims deserved the abuse he heaps on their heads. Geoffrey questions it. And if we actually examine Gildas’ testimony, it is plain he had good reason to.

### **The Five Tyrants**

Before we condemn a whole generation, even a whole race, on the word of one man, shouldn't we at least make sure we understand what he is accusing them of?

Dark Age historians do not seem to be in any doubt about the matter, but that is because they do not study Gildas, at least, they do not study all of Gildas. This may seem odd, as this is the sole surviving text from the period and now the only permitted witness. But there is some excuse for it, as Leslie Alcock explains: "If ever there was a prolix, tedious and exasperating work it is Gildas' *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*: 'Concerning the Ruin and Conquest of Britain'. A large part of it consists of Biblical quotations which are chiefly of technical interest to students of bible translations. Its historical section... is largely untrustworthy. The whole is written in a Latin which though technically correct is so involved in style and so obscure in vocabulary as to be always difficult, and as some points impossible, to understand."<sup>50</sup>

Gildas’ sermon divides into four sections. There is a prologue, explaining why he had to write it, an historical section designed to support the sermon’s theme, and the sermon proper, addressed to first the lay rulers, then the churchmen, the two sections opening with parallel denunciations: "Britain has kings, but they are tyrants; she has judges, but they are wicked." "Britain has priests, but they are fools; very many ministers, but they are shameless; clerics, but they are treacherous grabbers." The

<sup>47</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 30.2

<sup>48</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 32.1

<sup>49</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 33.1, 34.5


<sup>50</sup> Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, p21


denunciation of the priests consists almost entirely of biblical quotations. Two thirds of the tyrants' section is the same. Most of the history is complete nonsense. Historians concentrate their attention on those parts of the work which appear to contain historical information, that is, the last part of the historical section and the first part of the attack on the tyrants. This amounts to about one fifth of the whole work.

Historians hear Gildas addressing himself to the lay rulers of his day, condemning their violence. Actually, he addresses himself to five named rulers, and these are not all the rulers of Britain in his day, nor the only rulers known to him. Their territories are all believed to be in the south west of the island, in an arc stretching from north Wales down to Cornwall. Gildas only locates two, Constantine of Dumnonia and Vortipor of Demetia, that is, South West Wales. It is later Welsh texts that place Maglocunus in Gwynedd and his cousin Cuneglasus in Rhos. The territory of Aurelius Caninus is not known for certain, but is assumed to lie in the south west also. But British rule was not restricted to the south west at the time Gildas wrote. There were British kingdoms in the north until the last quarter of the sixth century, and others further east - a British ruler held Winchester around the turn of the century, remembered in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as Cerdic, ancestor of the Wessex kings. Some historians assume Gildas knew nothing of these other rulers, that he was a Westcountryman whose knowledge extended no further than his own locality. But Gildas himself tells us that the five rulers he condemns are not the only ones he knows of.

In Gildas' condemnation of the five tyrants, violence is what historians notice. But what Gildas actually focuses on is sex and violence. His rhetoric combines the two, denouncing them with equal ferocity and sometimes in the same breath: "diverse murders and adulteries" (Vortipor), "parricides, fornications, adulteries" (Aurelius Caninus). And beyond this splenetic and generalised denunciation Gildas accuses the five men of only **six specific crimes, of which three are sexual, two are acts of violence, and one happily combines the two.**

This last was committed by Maglocunus, the tyrant who gets the lion's share of Gildas' attention. Gildas tells us that he had an affair with his nephew's wife, and then, in order to marry her, had his own wife and his nephew killed. This would be shocking conduct in any age, if true. But we only have Gildas' word for it.

At the other extreme stands Vortipor, "bad son of good king", his hair already whitening, who has 'crowned' his crimes - though this is the only one listed - with "the rape of a shameless daughter after the removal and honourable death of your own wife". What is referred to here, scholars accept, is not rape but marriage, a marriage which the Roman Church regarded as within proscribed degrees but which  custom allowed. So the only specific 'crime' listed against Vortipor is, from another perspective, merely the remarriage of an elderly widower.

Similarly for Cuneglasus: The one specific crime listed against him is that he has put away his own wife and now casts eyes on her villainous sister, who is promised to God in chaste widowhood. Just as Vortipor's wife is not actually his daughter,  so Cuneglasus' intended is not likely the sister of his ex-wife. More probably this is just a case of a divorcee marrying a widow.

Do the tyrants deserve Gildas' condemnation? These were violent times, and we can believe at least some of what he tells us since it fits with what we know from elsewhere. Constantine killed his two youthful victims whilst in the robe of a holy abbot, according to Gildas, and Maglocunus became a monk after killing his uncle. Deadly dynastic disputes between close relatives with the loser retreating into the religious life in order to survive appear to be commonplace in this era, recorded frequently in Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*. The only strange element here is that Maglocunus, according to Gildas, had won.

There is no specific crime of violence laid at the door of Aurelius Caninus, Cuneglasus, or Vortipor. We have only Gildas' general condemnations. We cannot say that they were not violent, but is that why Gildas condemns them? He makes no complaint against Constantine's enemies, who have obviously used violence to drive him from the kingdom. And for the slain youths Gildas has nothing but praise. Were the youths not violent? Gildas tells us they bore arms, none more bravely than they: "and those same arms shall, in the day of judgement, hang at the gates of Christ's city, the honourable standards of their suffering and their faith". So the two youths are military martyrs!

And they do not stand alone. There are other virtuous rulers in Gildas' account. He refers to them as *duces*, which means leaders, rulers, commanders. The term tyrant, in his period, meant specifically an illegitimate ruler, a usurper, one not appointed by the proper authorities. The term *duces*, singular *dux*, has no such implication. *Dux* was a late Roman term for a military commander with administrative responsibilities. So Gildas has two terms for British rulers, one of which is condemnatory, the other not. Were these *duces* not violent? Gildas himself tells us they were:

What will our ill-starred commanders do now then? The few who have found the narrow path and left the broad behind are prevented by God from pouring forth prayers on your behalf as you persevere in evil and so grievously provoke him. On the other hand, if you had gone back to God genuinely (for God does not want the soul of a man to perish, and pulls a man back when he is cast out in case he is utterly destroyed), they could not have brought punishment upon you: after all, the prophet Jonah himself could not on the Ninevites, for all his desire to.<sup>51</sup>

We're not left in a quandary as to what the *duces* will do next. This section is positioned among the biblical quotes directed at the five tyrants, among Old Testament examples of kings who disobeyed God and in consequence suffered military defeat. The tyrants are about to suffer military defeat at the hands of *duces*, who have already metered out that punishment to them in the past. And from Gildas there is no word of condemnation against the *duces* for the violence they are about to perpetrate, or for that previously committed. The *duces* are God's instrument. They have left the broad path and found the narrow - like the royal youths, they are on the side of the angels.

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<sup>51</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 50.1

It is not civil violence, as such, which Gildas condemns; he condemns the five tyrants. The reasons why he condemns them are plain in Gildas' text, but they have escaped the notice of historians. But then historians, particularly Dark Age historians, are not best qualified to interpret Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*, since they themselves have so often remarked in Gildas' defence, that this is not a history, it's a sermon. The bulk of it consists of biblical quotations of interest to scholars specialising in such religious writings - and of little interest to Dark Age historians. But it is in these biblical quotations that the real key to Gildas' Britain lies.

### **The Sins of the Britons**

The largest section of Gildas' sermon, as one might expect, is addressed to the ecclesiastical authorities. Its opening parallels the attack on the tyrants, but there are no named individuals nor any specific sins. The clergy whom Gildas castigates are simply the inverse of all that Christian religious ought to be: greedy, lustful, lazy, worldly hypocrites, who preach charity to the poor but don't practice it, are neglectful of their priestly duties, contemptuous of Christ's teachings and set an appalling example to their flocks. Dark Age historians see this as a denunciation of all the clergy of Britain, who must have somehow deserved it.

But actually Gildas' attack does not encompass the entire British clergy. One small section, buried among his biblical quotes, addresses those not included in his condemnation: "But it may be said: not all bishops and presbyters as categorised above are bad, for they are not all stained with the disgrace of **schism, pride and uncleanness**."<sup>52</sup> This is actually the key to Gildas' entire text. Not all priests are bad, for they are not all guilty of schism: Pride and uncleanness are mere concomitants, *the sin of the bad priests is schism*. We can even name their heresy, though Gildas does not - the British Church was Pelagian.

Gildas is not trying to be subtle. Once we start to consider his sermon, not as a potential source of information on sub-Roman British history, but within the context of the religious controversies of the late Empire, his meaning is absolutely plain. Right at the beginning of his attack he tells us the British are congenitally evil, rebelling against God and legitimate authority: "What daring of man can, now or in the future, be more foul and wicked than to deny fear to God ... honour to those placed in higher authority ... to cast away fear of heaven and earth, and to be ruled each man by his own contrivances and lusts?"<sup>53</sup> By those placed in higher authority, Gildas leaves us in no doubt, he means Rome. Rebellion against Rome is equivalent to rebellion against God. This is the language of the Roman Church against dissidents.

Gildas' own contemporaries could not have missed this, and it seems to me unlikely that Geoffrey's would either. When Gildas denounces the bad priests for placing "that contriver of a filthy heresy, Nicolas, in the place of the martyr Stephen", of "usurping with unclean feet the seat of the apostle Peter" but falling through their greed into "the pestilential chair of the traitor Judas", when he describes the return of those who go abroad for consecration, "they return home, making their gait, which had

<sup>52</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69.1

<sup>53</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 4.1



been erect before, erecter still ... and burst on their country as though they were new creations, as once did Novatus at Rome, that despoiler of the Lord's pearl, the black swine", contemporaries would have heard an accusation of heresy.<sup>54</sup>

Dark Age historians have not heard it, for the historical consensus now insists, in the teeth of the evidence, that the British Church was impeccably orthodox, albeit degenerate. We have no evidence for degeneration, apart from Gildas, and Gildas has been misunderstood. The sources, motives and technical terminology of a writer must be comprehended before his witness can be used, as David Dumville points out.

**Wicked is a technical term in Gildas: It means Pelagian.**

But if this is the case with the clergy, what of the five tyrants? It is in Gildas' attack on the wicked priests we learn what their real crime is. The wicked priests are guilty of simony - of course they are! - but that's not all:

**But the error they are most prone to** - and the error that leaves least hope for them - **is that they buy priesthoods**, which are tainted and cannot avail them, not from the apostles or their successors, but **from the tyrants** and their father the devil. In fact, they are crowning the whole wicked structure of their lives with a kind of roof that can protect all their evils: the effect of which is that no one can easily reproach them with their crimes...<sup>55</sup>

They buy priesthoods from the tyrants! The 'apostles and their successors' are the bishops of the Roman Church, the true conduits of God's grace by whom alone salvation can be administered, as Augustinian theology had established, and Gildas reiterates: "To Peter and his successors the Lord says: 'And I shall give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven': but to you ... how will *you* loose anything..."<sup>56</sup> The wicked British clergy are not canonically ordained. They are ordained, and by their fellow clergy - Gildas' rhetoric suggests three generations of Pelagian clergy: "those who ordain these candidates for the priesthood ... do not greatly detest ... in their sons something which certainly happened in their own case, and that of their fathers too."<sup>57</sup> But the worst of their crimes, the one which protects all their other evils and prevents the Pelagian clergy from being brought to book, is that they have bought their priesthoods from the tyrants.

The sin of the five tyrants is not violence: violent and sexually decadent they may have been, we don't know, but the reason Gildas condemns them is that they are the lay protectors of the Pelagian British church.

### **Gildas' Motives**

Dark Age historians think they see in Gildas evidence of the sub-Roman collapse which they, in any case, expect to find. But Gildas is not evidence for that. The Britain he shows us is ruled, it is ordered. It is just that he does not like this order. The only

<sup>54</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 67.4, 66.2, 67.6

<sup>55</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 67.2.

<sup>56</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 109:5

<sup>57</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 67.4.

proper political order in Gildas' view is the Roman order, the order that prevailed during the Roman occupation and was, he tells us, re-established for a generation after Badon. Now it is gone. Britain still has her kings, her judges, her priests, ministers and clerics, but they are wicked; which is to say, they are Pelagian.

But not all: There are still some rulers who have left the broad path and found the narrow, some priests who are not guilty of schism, although not many. Gildas emphasises how few in number they are: "the few who have found the narrow path", "the very few good shepherds", "All the controls of truth and justice have been shaken and overthrown, leaving no trace, not even a memory, among the orders I have mentioned: with the exception of a few, a very few".<sup>58</sup> The righteous rulers are so far reduced in number in Gildas' own day that even the descendants of Ambrosius Aurelianus are not, apparently, among them. They are greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence, Gildas tells us. Historians believe Aurelius Caninus is one of them, and he is numbered among the tyrants.

Historians once thought they could distinguish two political factions in post-Roman Britain, a Pelagian Independent faction headed by Vortigern, and a Roman Orthodox faction led by Ambrosius. With the hereticisation of John Morris, most reputable historians regard this era as too dark to have a political history. The battle between Ambrosius and Vitalinus, Vortigern's fear of Ambrosius and the Romans, are fragments of a British tradition too late to have any historical relevance. The only allowable evidence is Gildas' sermon. But Gildas shows us the Britain of his day was indeed divided into these two factions, **a minority Roman faction led by the *duces*, and a Pelagian majority under the five tyrants**. Such division is dangerous, especially when there is an external foe waiting in the wings. What solution would a patriot propose to this perilous situation?

Gildas wrote, so historians universally believe, to warn his fellow countrymen of the dangers of civil war. And, they point out, he was right: It was the Britons' own internal division which ultimately exposed their country to the Saxon conquest. But is that really what Gildas foresaw? If he did, he made no attempt to avert it.

Gildas sought to persuade his countrymen to mend their wicked ways. By wicked, he means Pelagian. As a devoted Roman himself it is hardly to be wondered at that Gildas should advise the Pelagians that the means to avoid God's wrath is to convert to Rome. But as British patriot, as a man appalled by civil war and its consequences, intent on bringing his contemporaries to their senses, we might also expect him to appeal for calm and for tolerance of political and religious differences, especially in his address to the 'good' Roman priests.

Of the three groups he addresses himself to, the Roman priests are surely the section of his readership Gildas most expected to influence. Even they have fallen short of the ideal, he informs them, in an address composed entirely of biblical quotations.<sup>59</sup> He begins with the negative example of Eli, a priest of Israel who was punished, not for his own sins, but for the sins of his sons which he did not sufficiently reprove. Then follows thirty-three examples of perfection which the good priests have

<sup>58</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 50.1, 110.3, 26.3

<sup>59</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69-75

failed to live up to, starting with Abel: "Which of these men, I ask you, was killed like Abel because of the envy felt for a better sacrificial victim - one that went up to heaven in heavenly fire? For they scorn the reproach even of a moderate word." Because **the good priests have been insufficiently zealous in reproaching the wicked**, that is, the Pelagians, they have failed to get themselves martyred and now risk the doom which must fall on their sinful countrymen.

Gildas wrote to warn his countrymen of the wrath of God about to descend on them. How are the good priests to avoid sharing their fate? According to Gildas, they must eliminate all compromise with the enemies of God. All the examples he puts before them preach the same lesson; shun, separate, denounce, punish. Enoch "hated the counsel of the ill-wishers and refused to sit with the impious"; Noah "refused to admit into the ark of salvation (now, the church) anyone who was God's adversary". Elisha punished his dearest follower with leprosy - the good priests could at least dismiss theirs; Phinehas "rose energetically to punish fornication with no delay, healing the emotion of lust and the medicine of penitence, so that anger should not blaze against the people"; Jephthah sacrificed his only daughter "by which is understood his own pleasure" to gain victory over the Gentiles "acting in accordance with the words of the apostle: 'not seeking what is expedient to me, but what is expedient to many, that they may be saved.'"; Another ten examples reproach them for failing to get themselves martyred - including every example Gildas takes from the New Testament. And from the Old Testament, we have Jeremiah, who "endured the squalors and stenches of prison, like small deaths, because he passed on the commands of God, threats from heaven and the truth even to those who did not want to hear him" - a reproach which could not be levelled against Gildas.

So, the good priests have failed to achieve martyrdom because they have not done what Gildas himself is doing in his sermon, reproach the tyrants, with sufficient venom, for their heresy. Of course, it could be said in defence of the good priests that it is no easy task to get oneself martyred by Pelagians, since they did not hold with religious persecution - Gildas himself was not martyred. But from the point of understanding Gildas, what we observe from this is that **the Pelagian and the Roman churches in Britain appear to have reached a *modus vivendi* - which Gildas has set himself to disturb.**

A peace-loving patriot, observing the division among the Britons themselves and the Saxon settlements, now quiescent, positioned dangerously on their flanks, might well have felt inspired to raise a voice of protest against civil violence. But that man isn't Gildas. He does not merely advocate a quest for martyrdom. He goes much further. Abraham "freely offered his own son to be slaughtered on the alter, so as to fulfil a command similar to that of Christ, who said that when one's right eye offends it should be plucked out, and so as to avoid the curse of the prophet on one preventing the sword and the shedding of blood".<sup>60</sup>

*The curse of the prophet on one preventing the shedding of blood!* Gildas is not referring only to the blood of the good priests which they ought to shed in martyrdom.

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<sup>60</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69.4

He places before them also the example of Elijah, who "burned up a hundred proud men with fire from heaven, preserving fifty humble men, and with no colour of flattery announced his coming death to a wicked king",<sup>61</sup> and of Samuel, who "appointed a king without flattering him, rejected the same man when he displeased God, and anointed a better in his royal place".<sup>62</sup> Good priests must not only provoke wicked rulers into martyring them, they should dethrone them. But how? Gildas tells us:

Which, like Melchizedek offered sacrifice and gave blessing to the victors only when they had, to the number of three hundred (that is, the mystery of the trinity) freed a just man and defeated the dire armies of five kings and their conquering squadrons, and had no desire for what belonged to others?<sup>63</sup>

This could hardly be more explicit. The good priests are to be criticised because they have failed to withhold their blessing until the dire armies of five kings have been defeated - this from Gildas, who 'prophesies' that the five tyrants will be punished by God for the loss of their kingdoms. And if Melchizedek's example were not plain enough -

Which of them imitated Joshua either in the utter uprooting (in a moral significance) of seven races from the promised land or in the establishment of spiritual Israel in their place?<sup>64</sup>

Which of them among us, like that same Elisha, has by fervent prayer to God opened the eyes of a boy sweating in despair of his life and suddenly terrified at the warlike preparations of the enemy besieging the city they were in, so that he could see the mountain full of allies from the heavenly army, armed chariots and horsemen flashing with fiery countenances, and believe that he was stronger to save than his enemies to fight?<sup>65</sup>

So good priests should reassure their flocks that no matter how great the military might of the enemy, God will sustain His own in the coming conflict. What conflict?

The English of Bede's day had adopted Gildas. He denounced the wickedness of the British, and said God would give their lands to a better race. And so it came about, that better race was themselves. But that's the view of hindsight. Gildas in this sermon does not anticipate a renewal of the Saxon revolt. The Saxons were in the past the instrument of God's wrath, sent to punish the congenital sin of the Britons. But in his own day that punishment is to be carried out by those who listen to the preaching of the good priests, not by pagans. It is the ill-starred commanders, the few good rulers who have left the broad path and found the narrow way, who are to punish the five

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<sup>61</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 71.3

<sup>62</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 71.2

<sup>63</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69.3

<sup>64</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 70.1

<sup>65</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 72.2

tyrants and remove their protection from the wicked priests. And the good priests must incite them to this act, so Gildas instructs them.

Gildas is not warning against the dangers of civil war, he is preaching a crusade.

### **Gildas' Sources**

Dark Age historians are entirely mistaken in their assessment of Gildas' motives. Then they are equally mistaken in their judgement of his history.

It is Gildas who tells us Badon was a Roman victory. From the combination of Gildas and Nennius a later age derived Arthur, Last of the Romans, heir to Ambrosius. This image held up until the publication of Morris' *The Age of Arthur*. Even those few historians who did not regard the survival of Rome as a Good Thing still accepted the idea of Arthur the Roman. John Morris believed Roman survivals crippled early medieval Europe, but still thought Arthur fought to preserve Roman Britain, that there was nothing else he could have fought for.<sup>66</sup> Jack Lindsay, although his own sympathies are entirely with the *bacaudae*, is sure Badon was a Roman victory: "the way in which Gildas tells the story is proof of that."<sup>67</sup> It is this Arthur that Richard Barber mocked when it was still the orthodox view, an Arthur conjured up by our own imaginings to fill the blank in British history, "a last heroic bearer of the flame of Roman civilisation against the black barbarian night."<sup>68</sup>

Now the consensus is that we have only Gildas to turn to for evidence of this period, and Gildas does not credit Badon to Arthur. Ambrosius is the only British leader who fought the Saxons in Gildas' account, and the victory of Badon which brought that struggle to a close was, he intends us to understand, Ambrosius' victory. So Arthur departs, but the Roman victory remains. It does so on the word of one man, and that man is not a historian.

Wherever we can check Gildas' historical section against other sources it turns out to be nonsense. Why should we believe him in this? The argument runs thus: Gildas' errors in the first part of history are no fault of his, he had no sources, knowledge itself had been wiped from men's minds, all contemporaries as ignorant as he, and so none of them would be aware of how far from the truth Gildas' history departed. But when we come to part within living memory, Gildas would tell the truth. If he didn't, all his contemporaries would know he was lying, thus destroying his credit as a preacher and undermining the very purpose of his sermon, to persuade his compatriots to mend their wicked ways. But this is all deduction from a false premise. Gildas' compatriots weren't wicked, they were Pelagian, and he was not attempting to persuade them. His sermon is a threat, and his history is a lie.

It is Gildas himself who tells us he had no British sources from which to write a history. Actually, that's not quite what he says. This is:

I shall not speak of the ancient errors ... that bound the whole of humanity fast before the coming of Christ ... I shall not enumerate the devilish monstrosities

<sup>66</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p119

<sup>67</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p215

<sup>68</sup> Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p17-18

of my land, numerous almost as those that plagued Egypt ... I shall simply try to bring to light the ills she suffered in the time of the Roman emperors and inflicted on other men, even those far away. I shall do this as well as I can, using not so much literary remains from this country (which, such as they were, are not now available, having been burnt by enemies or removed by our countrymen when they went into exile) as foreign tradition: and that has frequent gaps to blur it.<sup>69</sup>

So, Gildas is about to give us a history of Roman Britain. He won't include an account of pre-Roman Britain - he could do, if he wanted, but he won't - and he'll tell this story, not from the literary remains of his own country, but from "foreign tradition". His translator Michael Winterbottom has put his explanation for this decision in brackets. There were no brackets in Gildas' day, and Winterbottom has been criticised for intruding modern punctuation into his translation.<sup>70</sup> But his interpretation is clearly correct, this phrase is a sub-clause of the main sentence. The main import of the sentence is that Gildas will be writing his history of Roman Britain from foreign rather than from native sources. The clause in brackets is an explanation for his decision not to use the native literary remains. But if none existed, what's to explain? And why tell us that his foreign tradition has "frequent gaps to blur it".

What Gildas is actually announcing is his intention to write a non-British history, an anti-British history, a history in opposition to the history remembered by his nation. His reasons are plain. His history section is intended purely to back his sermon. The theme of his sermon is that rebellion against Rome is equivalent to rebellion against God, and that this congenitally British sin always has, and always must, lead to disaster and especially to military defeat. But the real history, the history that actually happened, does not support his thesis, it supports that of his Pelagian opponents, point by point. And so Gildas rewrites it, point by point.

### **The Holy Empire**

Gildas' history is not a history of Britain but a history, as he says himself, of the wrongs Britain inflicted on herself and others during and immediately after the Roman period. Helpfully, before he starts, he gives a brief summary of the points he intends to cover:

I shall try, God willing, to say a little about the situation of Britain: about her obstinacy, subjection, and rebellion, her second subjection and harsh servitude; about religion, persecution, the holy martyrs, diverse heresies, tyrants, two plundering races; about defence and a further devastation, about a second vengeance and a third devastation; about hunger, about the letter to Aëtius, about victory, crimes, enemies suddenly announced, a memorable plague, a council, an enemy much more savage than the first, the destruction of cities; about those who survived, and about the final victory of our country that has been granted to our times by the will of God.

<sup>69</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 4.2-4

<sup>70</sup> See above, Book 1, p49-50

We begin with 'obstinacy, subjection and rebellion'. By obstinacy and subjection Gildas means the Roman conquest of Britain - except that there is no Roman conquest in Gildas' account. The Roman invasion he describes as a natural phenomenon "...the keen edge of flame, holding its unbending course westward, could not be restrained or extinguished by the blue torrent of the ocean..." and a natural phenomenon is of its nature beyond moral reproach. But the Britons are not beyond moral reproach. Unwarlike but untrustworthy, they offered no resistance to Rome but their obedience was superficial, and they nursed their resentment deep in their hearts. Of course we know that the British did resist. Geoffrey and all his contemporaries knew this too. And so did Gildas and his contemporaries. In his period the names of Caradoc (Caractacus) and Cynfelin (Cunobelinus), famed leaders of the original British resistance, were given to the children of British nobility. The memory of their opposition to Rome was a source of pride to the British ruling class in Gildas' day.

The British offered no resistance, Gildas says, until the Romans - allegedly for want of land - went back to Rome, suspecting nothing. Thereupon the natives, led by a treacherous lioness, rose in revolt and butchered the Roman governors left behind to rule the country. There is no surviving Roman account of Boudicca's uprising that does not admit Rome's culpability, but Gildas, despite his intense interest in sexual crime, admits no knowledge of it. His reasons for including this incident in his sparse history appear to relate to events of his own time. He refers to another female ruler as a lioness: **the tyrant Constantine is a whelp of the "filthy lioness of Dumnonia", which suggests he inherited his throne from his mother** - women in the Celtic world were not excluded from rulership. To the misogynist Church of Rome, however, any exercise of authority by a female was an abomination. Hence the lesson Gildas draws from Boudicca's revolt, a 'second subjection and harsh servitude': "the Romans slaughtered many of the treasonable, keeping a few as slaves" - the rule of a woman, being a wicked aberration, must end in disaster for the nation. According to Gildas the very name Britannia ceased, the island became Romania "and all its bronze, silver and gold should be stamped with the image of Caesar". The function of this remark is absolutely plain. Did not Christ, when questioned on the propriety of paying taxes to Rome, hold up a coin bearing Caesar's image and instruct his hearers to "render unto Caesar"?

Next, in Gildas narrative, we come to 'religion, persecution, the holy martyrs'. So soon as Roman rule is firmly established, Christianity arrives in Britain, according to Gildas in the reign of Tiberius, who "threatened the death penalty for informers against soldiers of God." The British received the faith without enthusiasm but preserved it "more or less pure" up to and throughout the dreadful persecution of Diocletian. In that black night God saved Britain by lighting for us the brilliant lamps of the martyrs. Gildas names three of them, Alban of Verulamium and Aaron and Julius of the city of the Legion. But after less than ten years the whirlwind had passed away and the champions of Christ emerged glad-eyed, to rebuild the churches and rejoice,

“warmed in the bosom of the mother church”.

Tiberius died in 37 AD. Boudicca’s revolt was in 60 AD and Diocletian’s persecution began in 303. Gildas’ history of Roman Britain passes over some two hundred and fifty years in silence. Does he know no better? Tiberius, defender of the faith, is not his invention. Tertullian presents us with the same character, and he is quoted by Eusebius who was one of Gildas’ sources. But the British martyrs executed under Diocletian are all his own work. The Diocletian persecution never extended to Britain. It features large in Eusebius’ history, a winter of discontent before the glorious summer of Constantine’s rule. But Britain was ruled by Constantine’s father, the Caesar of the Gallic prefecture, who never enforced the anti-Christian edicts.

We have other sources for the martyrdom of Alban. He was executed a hundred years earlier, in the reign of Severus and during that emperor’s visit to Britain. Gildas places his martyrdom during the time of Diocletian because his is the only Roman persecution of Christians he is prepared to admit to - and that grudgingly. St. Alban is not actually taken and killed by the Romans, rather “the taking of his blood” occurs “in the presence of wicked men who displayed the Roman standards to the most horrid effect”. That the wicked men had any right to display the Roman standards, that they were in fact the military arm of a legitimate Roman government, is scarcely admitted in Gildas’ account.

What Gildas is up to here is denying the claims of the British Church of the Martyrs. The Christianity which came to Britain as a result of the Roman conquest was “pure”, he tells us, that is, Roman. The British themselves deserve no credit for their conversion, they received the faith “without enthusiasm” though it remained “more or less pure” until the solitary Roman persecution of Diocletian. This is simply a flat contradiction of the native Church’s claim to have preserved the faith as she originally received it, through centuries of brutal Roman oppression. Gildas’ rhetoric reduces that brutal Roman oppression to the absolute minimum: it lasted less than ten years, all the British martyrs are to be compressed into that brief period, and it was perpetrated, by who knows whom, in the presence of wicked men carrying Roman standards - quite as if they weren’t entitled to them.

Next we come to ‘diverse heresies, tyrants, two plundering races’. Britain’s slide into heresy, according to Gildas, occurred only after the persecution of Diocletian even though the British had a natural tendency towards that sin. In the immediate aftermath of that event there was “pleasant agreement between the head and limbs of Christ”. The “fatal separation of brothers who had lived as one” occurred later, when “the Arian treason like a savage snake vomited its foreign poison upon us”. So far from holding to the original tradition as they had received it Gildas tells us the British were exceptionally open to heresy as they “always longed to hear some novelty - and never took firm hold of anything.” And thus the tyrant thickets grew till they were almost bursting into a savage forest, the island still Roman in name was no longer so in fact, but put forth a sprig of its own bitter planting and sent Maximus to Gaul.

Gildas knew perfectly well that Maximus was no Arian, since Orosius was one of his sources. He also knew of Constantine III, though it didn’t suit his purpose to mention



that emperor. Likewise it didn't suit him to relate the real story of the end of Roman Britain, though he did know it. The clue is in the story of the walls which the Romans instructed the Britons to build, in between their valiant rescues of their faithless allies.

It is Maximus' wicked revolt which brings the 'two plundering races' down on Britain's defenceless head. There follows 'defence and a further devastation'. After the first rescue the Romans instruct the Britons to build a wall across the island. They obey, but the wall fails to protect them because, Gildas tells us, "it was the work of a leaderless and irrational mob, and made of turf rather than of stone". After the 'second vengeance' a second wall was built under Roman supervision, using the normal method of construction, drawing on public and private funds and employing forced labour. Thus Gildas redates Hadrian's and the Antonine walls to the fifth century. Bede is left to adapt this nonsense as best he can. Historians just ignore it. It isn't history. But it is highly relevant to Gildas' own period.

Earthwork construction was the usual defensive method in Britain in Gildas' day. It was in this era that the Wansdyke was erected, and though the most spectacular it was only one of many major works. Cadbury castle and many other hill forts were refortified and brought back into use. **Gildas' insult is addressed to contemporary rulers. Roman construction is in stone. Earthworks are the creations of leaderless and irrational mobs.** These are the terms Roman writers applied to the *bacaudae*. Roman rule in Britain was brought to an end in a *bacauda* revolt. Gildas knows this.

In the immediate aftermath of that revolt independent Britain freed herself from barbarian attack. Roman sources tell us of her resounding success. Gildas says the opposite. Is it likely that he didn't know? Is it likely that contemporary Britons, who preserved their Church of the Martyrs in defiance of the Roman state, who revived the names of champions who had fought against the original imposition of Roman rule, did not remember that, Rome having failed to defend them, they took up arms on their own behalf and drove out both the Romans and the barbarians?

Gildas' nonsense history is not an honest error. Every distortion in it serves a purpose. The function of his history section is to support his sermon - it had to be bent to fit because the history that actually happened didn't back it. Gildas would have it that the cause of God and Rome are identical, that heresy and treason are one and the same thing. The congenital sin of the Britons is their rejection of Rome, that is to say, of the will of God, and the principal theme of Gildas' sermon is that military defeat will fall on those who disobey the will of God. In the fifth century the immediate consequence of Britain's rejection of Roman rule was actually the opposite. So Gildas rewrote history.

### **The Saxon Chastisement**

Gildas' historical introduction is not history at all, it is there merely to illustrate the sermon's theme. Historians know this, yet Gildas is allowed to exert a profound and distorting influence on our understanding of this era of British history. David Dumville makes him our prime source for a period of one hundred and fifty years, a principle

which, if carried out, must damn this critical period to perpetual obscurity.

The 'Roman withdrawal' is from Gildas. The story is ludicrous. No empire, no government, forgoes taxes on the grounds of its own incompetence. So why does he say it? It has nothing to do with the modern notion of a Rome under barbarian pressure withdrawing troops from the periphery to defend the heart of the empire. In Gildas' story no Roman troops are ever stationed in Britain, and the Empire is never under pressure. The barbarian raids are a purely British phenomenon, a punishment for the sin of rebellion against Rome. But Gildas was writing at a time when the entire western empire, except Britain, was under German rule. Clearly ignorance has nothing to do with this.

Gildas invents the Roman withdrawal in order to exonerate Rome from any blame in the Saxon revolt. The whole history of independent Britain is structured for that purpose. He is working, like Geoffrey, from the history that actually happened, shattering it into fragments and recycling the pieces to form an entirely new picture. The troops of Maximus may well have been settled in northern Gaul, but it is Gildas who makes this the only troop withdrawal from Britain and the original cause of the barbarian raids. There were two British rescues hymned by Roman writers, which Gildas redates to after Britain's secession from the empire. There was a Roman instruction to the British civitates that they should look to their own defence, at the time of Honorius, but it is Gildas who turns this into a warning that henceforth Rome intends to have nothing to do with the ex-province. There will be no third rescue, they were told. And the Britons have only themselves to blame. It was their treacherous rebellion under Maximus which caused the original division, and they had no right even to expect the two rescues, however humbly besought, which Rome had generously supplied. And having been publicly warned of Rome's intention they had no possible reason to hope for any response from the letter to Aëtius.

In a history with almost no names, and only two from the fifth century, it is surely significant that Gildas mentions Aëtius, and the letter, twice. He includes both in his summary of the history's content, and later quotes from the letter - the only time he cites any historical document as a source for his history. The matter was plainly of considerable importance, still, in his own day. Which suggests that the British felt they had every reason to expect a response from Aëtius, and the fact that they didn't get it still counted against the Roman faction in Gildas' day.

Of course in Gildas' version there was no Roman faction in fifth-century Britain. Ambrosius, Last of the Romans, had parents who wore the purple but Gildas tells us nothing of their doings. There is no battle of Wallop, indeed no connection whatsoever between Ambrosius and the Proud Tyrant. There is no Germanus either. There is never any Roman interference in British affairs. The two Roman rescues occurred only because the Britons begged for such assistance, and afterwards the Romans said goodbye, meaning never to return. The Britons, of course, suffered dreadfully without Rome's protection, being too cowardly and idle to fight for themselves. But then, finally, God did grant a victory. Peace and prosperity followed, with the inevitable descent into vice and debauchery. In this period the Proud Tyrant and the council invited the Saxons

into Britain. Gildas emphasises that the invitation was not a response to an actual attack. It was mere rumour that provoked this insane decision. It was God preparing a sufficient chastisement for the wicked Britons. All this rhetoric is to deny one basic fact - the Saxons were invited in and positioned on the south east coast to guard against a Roman invasion.

The revolt occurred after the Saxons had grown in number. 'Nennius' tells us they arrived in 428, the Gallic Chronicler that they took over the province in 441, time enough for their numbers to grow. Gildas dates the Saxon advent to some considerable time after the letter to Aëtius. For Bede, of course, Gildas was practically gospel, and he did his utmost to follow him. It wasn't easy. Some Dark Age historians still strive to agree with Gildas, and date the Saxon Advent to the second half of the fifth century. This means discarding a contemporary source writing only a decade after the event with no possible reason for deception and no chance of readers not spotting this blatant falsehood, in favour of the historical introduction to a sermon written generations later, written purely to support that sermon, which is known to discard those facts which don't serve the sermon's purpose and which, for almost every incident it reports, can be proved to be wrong. The motives of the Dark Age historians remain inscrutable. But Gildas' motives are plain enough. He redates the Saxon advent in order to exonerate Rome. So far from being allowed to grow in numbers because of the Roman threat, there were no Saxons here until long after Rome had left, indeed, until long after the unanswered letter to Aëtius, the final proof that Rome had no intention of interfering in British affairs. Nothing that Rome did could possibly have triggered the Saxon revolt.

With the Saxon revolt Gildas, usually so vague and rhetorical, suddenly gets detailed. 'Nennius' tells us simply that the barbarians grew in number to the point that the Britons could no longer supply them with food and clothing, so they bid them to go away, as their services were no longer required, and the Saxons rebelled. Gildas also admits the question of supplies was the apparent cause of the revolt. But, he insists, it wasn't really so. The Saxons had arrived with treacherous intent from the start. Finding the first brood prospered the mother lioness sent more of the satellite dogs. These falsely presented themselves as soldiers willing to risk their lives for their hosts, and so were granted the supplies they requested which, for a time, "shut the dog's mouth". But then they again demanded more supplies, claiming their monthly allowance was insufficient, and "purposely giving a false colour to individual incidents". What incidents?

In Gildas' version of events the supplies had not been cut off, nor had the Saxons been denied an increase. It was all merely a ruse. "Purposely giving a false colour to individual incidents they swore that they would break their agreement and plunder the whole island unless more lavish payment were heaped on them." They were not refused the more lavish payment. They gave the Britons no time to comply: "There was no delay: they put their threats into immediate effect." **What Gildas is here elaborately denying is that the Saxon revolt was triggered by the Roman faction attempting to weaken Vortigern by refusing to supply his Saxon federates.** The Saxons were

stationed on the south east coast. Their revolt from Vortigern would make it possible for Aëtius to land. But Aëtius never came.

Taking Gildas literally makes as much sense as taking Geoffrey literally. He is not so honest a writer, he doesn't deliberately show us how the trick is worked whilst he's performing it. But Gildas is plain enough. Fifth-century British history is not so obscure as some would pretend; we know what happened and we know when. By the time of Aëtius' third consulship, between 446 and 454, it was plain that the Roman faction in Britain had seriously miscalculated. They had succeeded in breaking Vortigern's Saxons from their alliance, but instead of Britain's restitution to the empire, all they produced was chaos.

But out of that chaos a light arose. Ambrosius, Last of the Romans, organised the British resistance. The battered remnants of the nation flocked to his standard, the war against the pagans went this way and that but finally there was the victory of Badon - a Roman victory, according to Gildas. In the circumstances, is this likely?

### **Britain's Champion**

Of the rain-showers of the hostile that Gildas said would compete to beat down on his little work, nothing now remains. But we can reconstruct his opponent's version of British history from Gildas' attack on it. Rome in their eyes had no claim to dominion over Britain. She had taken the land by force. She was not the bringer of Christianity to Britain, the faith was held here before ever Rome converted, and it was a British 'usurper', whose name Gildas is careful never to mention, who brought about that conversion. Whilst Britain was a part of the Empire Rome failed to protect her from barbarian attack. On leaving the empire the British successfully protected themselves. But Rome was not prepared to let it go at that. Instead she stirred up opposition to the native British ruler and precipitated the Saxon revolt. And then, when the Roman faction in Britain had every reason to expect Roman intervention, Rome failed to act.

This was the final betrayal. But it was a betrayal, not of the Pelagian Independence faction, but of the pro-Roman Britons themselves. The magnates, those Britons who gained the most from the Roman dominion and were its most ardent supporters, were also the Britons with the most to lose, and in the turmoil of the Saxon revolt doubtless many of them lost it. Their fertile lands, their accumulated wealth, would be the focus for the Saxon plunderers, and even when the invaders were driven back, could the landlord's dues be reimposed on a population who had lost the habit of paying? Small wonder if, after the revolt and the Brittany migration, the Roman faction was reduced to a rump. And Gildas says it was: "a few, a very few ... so small a number that, as they lie in her lap, the holy mother church in a sense does not see them, though they are the only true sons she has left."<sup>71</sup> Yet it was this Roman faction, Ambrosius Aurelianus and his followers, who initiated the British resistance and brought it to a successful conclusion at Badon, so Gildas tells us. But Gildas couldn't tell it any other way. In his story all victory is God-given, and God is on the side of the Romans.

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<sup>71</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 26.3

Historians believe him. Gildas is a contemporary witness, writing within living memory less than forty four years after the event. So whether it was Arthur or Ambrosius who fought there, the verdict is that Badon was a Roman victory. But Gildas is not a historian. His history is there merely to illustrate his sermon's theme, that theme being that military defeat will follow rebellion against God and Rome. When every other aspect of his fifth-century history of Britain has been twisted out of shape to support this picture, we surely have reason to doubt him in this.

Besides, his is not the only version of the British resistance to have come down to us. We also have 'Nennius'. 'Nennius' gives Ambrosius no role whatsoever in the British resistance. He makes him, or them, an enemy of Vortigern. He tells us of Wallop. His history includes a legendary account of their conflict; the fatherless boy who is son of a consul takes over the tyrant's fortress and all the western kingdoms of Britain. But as for the British resistance, in 'Nennius' it is begun by Vortimer and concluded by Arthur. So who was Arthur? Where did he stand?

The Pelagian independence faction was not obliterated in the conflict. Vortigern founded a dynasty which still held power in the ninth century. It became extinct in the person of Concenn of Powys, he of the Greek cryptogram. His sister's marriage to Merfyn of Gwynedd united the two realms under the new dynasty. It was shortly after that, according to Nora Chadwick, that there began a process of literary damnation which made Vortigern the villain of fifth-century British history.

The scapegoating of Vortigern begins with Gildas. But Gildas was the spokesman for a minority faction - a faction which he claimed won the war but after that magnificent victory was reduced to a tiny fragment. The leader of the resistance was Ambrosius, he says. There is no confirmation in any other source. The entire British tradition of later years venerated the name of Arthur. Gildas does not mention Arthur. From that fact Dark Age historians conclude that Arthur never existed, that the entire British tradition is an invention and only Gildas is telling the truth. There is a more likely deduction: Gildas doesn't mention Arthur for the same reason that he does not mention Constantine III, or Constantine the Great - it does not suit the purpose of his sermon to do so. It doesn't suit, because Gildas is presenting us with Badon as a Roman victory, and it was not. Badon was not Ambrosius' victory, it was Arthur's. And Arthur was not of the Roman faction. He was heir, not to Ambrosius, but to Vortigern. The Saxon menace was destroyed by the leader of the Pelagian Independence faction.

### **Vortigern's Heir**

In Geoffrey's history Arthur is the nephew of Ambrosius. We know where he got that from. It is not to be found in any ancient source and there is no trace of it in British tradition before the twelfth century. It was a contemporary of Geoffrey's, William of Malmesbury, who made the link between Arthur with Ambrosius. According to William, Arthur was Ambrosius' champion, and he plainly arrived at that deduction from his reading of Bede, Gildas and 'Nennius'. Geoffrey made use of William's book, but only to mock it. He does not ask his readers to take his own history literally. He directs us

to critically examine the older sources.

It is in 'Nennius' that we find Arthur, victor of Badon. Bede and Gildas have Badon as a great defeat of the Saxons, but do not mention Arthur. It is a Roman victory, according to Bede, but, as Geoffrey's readers would be aware, Bede has no other source for this than Gildas. And Gildas does not actually say that Ambrosius fought at Badon. However he does describe Ambrosius as the last of the Romans. What, then, was Arthur?

Geoffrey tells us that Arthur was Rome's enemy. At the apex of his power, as he celebrates Whitsun at Caerleon with all his greatest vassals and underkings, messages reach him from the Roman Senate and Procurator Lucius, denouncing his seizure of Gaul and his refusal to pay tribute to the empire and demanding he travel to Rome and submit himself to judgement. The Whitsun crown-wearing was a contemporary ceremony. Geoffrey adds a few exotic touches. At Caerleon there were two famous churches, one dedicated to the martyr Julius and graced by a choir of lovely virgins, and the other, the third metropolitan church of Britain, dedicated to his companion Aaron and served by two hundred canons learned in astronomy and the other arts. Before the Whitsun feast the entire court heard mass, the king leading the men into the metropolitan church of Aaron, the queen leading their wives into the church of Julius. The separation of the men and women of the congregation at mass did not occur in the western church at this time. But it would have been known, through the crusades, that this was a feature of the Greek Church. This is surely a broad enough hint.

If it isn't obvious to contemporary historians it could not have escaped the attention of Geoffrey's readers that Gildas is denouncing his contemporaries for heresy. In their own day kings had been overthrown for failing to support the True Church - this was the excuse for the Norman invasion of England, after all. Even as Geoffrey wrote Roman churchmen were denouncing the irregularity of the Celtic clergy and encouraging military attacks against them. Bede had accused the Britons of heresy, and claimed they had lost their land by God's will. And Geoffrey tells us Rome challenged Arthur.

In Geoffrey's story it was the war against Rome which brought the Arthurian age, the golden age of British rule, to a catastrophic close. The Roman challenge was not enough in itself, Arthur was well able to meet that. **It was a combination of enemies, the Roman empire, the pagan Saxons, and native traitors, that brought Arthur down. Is Geoffrey making this up? Exactly the same combination brought down Vortigern.**

There is nothing in Bede, Gildas or Nennius to confirm that this happened in Arthur's case. But these are not the only historical sources that Geoffrey directs us to examine.

# Heretic Emperor

The Lost History of King Arthur

V M Pickin

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## BOOK 4

### THE WAR

*Men could not remember, except through the mist of legend, the time before the Romans came. Rome was an eternal city. The summer of her rule seemed like the summers of our childhood - age-long and unending. But autumn came, and the drear midwinter.*

*Autumn came to the Roman Island when reckless officers in Britain set themselves up as local Emperors. Battles were fought again in Britain ... Self-seeking officers led detachments of the garrisons of Britain to the Continent to fight their ambitious wars, leaving harbour and frontier open to the raids of pirate and pillager.*

*Winter came when Rome itself, the eternal city, fell to the barbarians. In Britain, the sea raiders came, and the land raiders from the North ... The red tiles slid from the roofs of neglected houses. The walls crumbled round the deserted cities. Dead leaves swirled over the disused grass-grown roads; chapel and temple alike fell, and hare and rabbit peopled them. Raiders and refugees, squatters and survivors, hunters and hunted, lit their squalid camp fires on the rich mosaic floors.*

*Beram Saklatvala, Arthur: Roman Britain's Last Champion, 1967*



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## Chapter 14

### Restitutor Orbis

*The man seen as the last hope of a dying empire, he's the man about whom this huge body of myth would gather, not some obscure chieftain bopping a few Saxons here and there - there were plenty doing that. The original of Arthur had to be, was seen to be, something special, and this Riothamus fits the bill exactly.*

*Craig Weatherhill, 2001<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Arthur-Riothamus**

Geoffrey claimed in his preface that his book was a simple translation from a single British text. He never intended anyone to believe him. His history is a demonstration of his literary skill and vast erudition. One study traced cross-references to twenty eight separate Latin authors.<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey read very widely and he wants us to know it. And it is no unknown British source that formed the basis of his legal argument but the history familiar to all educated men. The three insular texts he makes such conspicuous use of make no reference to Arthur's continental war, but they were not his only sources. Geoffrey directs us further afield, to the known history of Europe.

Geoffrey names for us the Roman rulers at the time of Arthur's war. The challenge to Arthur was issued by Lucius Hiberius, whom Geoffrey titles variously as Procurator and Emperor, in conjunction with the Roman Senate. There is no Lucius Hiberius in any list of Roman Emperors. But Lucius has a co-Emperor, Leo, and it is Leo whom Geoffrey presents to us as the supreme authority over the Roman Empire in Arthur's day. In Arthur's first continental campaign, his conquest of Gaul, the province "was at that time under the jurisdiction of Tribune Frolo, who ruled it in the name of the Emperor Leo". In the second campaign, when the British forces are getting the better of it, Lucius Hiberius decided to "withdraw inside Autun and there wait for reinforcements from the Emperor Leo". And when the continental war is brought to a premature close by the news of Mordred's treachery: "Arthur immediately cancelled the attack which he had planned to make on Leo, Emperor of the Romans."<sup>3</sup>

There never was a western Emperor Leo, but a number of Byzantine emperors bore that name. Two ruled in the fifth century, the third not until the eighth century - too late to be Geoffrey's Leo. Leo II was a child emperor whose reign lasted just eleven months. There is really only one candidate: Leo I, who ruled between 457 and 474.

In Geoffrey's story Leo is the supreme Roman authority. Though he sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> interviewed for *In Search of the King*, broadcast 26th August 2001, in the Carlton Westcountry series *Westcountry Tales*.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Hammer - see *Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain*, Lewis Thorpe, Introduction, p18

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ix.11 p223, x.6 p246, xi p258

calls Lucius Hiberius an emperor he presents him as taking orders from the senate. He is plainly not Leo's equal. There was a time when the rulers of the western Roman Empire had the title of Emperor, but not the power. In the third quarter of the fifth century, before the title of western emperor was discontinued, real power had already passed to the eastern emperors. Leo I was the eastern emperor for most of that period.

Geoffrey is clearly directing his readers to the reign of Leo I, and this has led some writers to conclude that the real King Arthur was Leo's contemporary. Geoffrey Ashe, in *The Discovery of King Arthur*, points out another three characters in Geoffrey's history that he may have derived from real individuals who lived in this era.

First, there is Lucius Hiberius himself - he never existed, but in a chronicle of Sigebert of Gembloux there is a western emperor Lucerius. This is actually a misreading for Glycerius, whose dates are 473-4. Sigebert, however, also got the dates wrong: He dates Lucerius to 469 - 470.

Then there is Pope Sulpicius. In Geoffrey's story we meet this pope just once, immediately before we are introduced to Leo. Arthur's nephew Gawain, a boy of twelve, was sent to serve in Pope Sulpicius' household and was dubbed a knight by him. There was no pope of that name. But there was a Pope Simplicius, and this would be an easy mistake for a copyist to make. Simplicius' dates are 468 to 483.

Thirdly, there is Childeric. Ashe tentatively suggests that the Saxon leader Chelric, Mordred's ally, may recall the Frankish king Childeric, whose pact with the Saxons preserved their remnants in the Loire valley. "In this case Geoffrey would have got the name only, but he could have got that, plus a vague association with Saxons and double-dealing".<sup>4</sup> Childeric ruled the Franks, with one interruption, from around 456 to his death in 481.

It is Ashe's contention that Geoffrey of Monmouth is pointing to a particular year. According to Geoffrey's sources, there was one date when all four characters coincided, the year 469-70. And in that year there was a significant continental war, in which a British contingent under a British king did play an important role. This was the year in which Riothamus brought 12,000 troops to the aid of Emperor Anthemius in his war against the Goths. Jordanes records that the Britons and the Goths fought for a long time at Bourges, but before the Romans could bring reinforcements the Goths routed the Britons. Riothamus, having lost the greater part of his army, fled to the Burgundians.

Riothamus means 'most kingly' or 'supreme king'. It could be a title. Riothamus, like Arthur, was brought down by treachery. No source records his death. The last notice has him retreating from Bourges towards the territory of the Burgundians. If we project the line of his retreat on a map we see him heading towards a place called Avallon. And so, Ashe concludes, the mysterious King Arthur is no longer elusive. History does remember the supreme champion of the Britons, but it remembers him under a different name: Arthur is Riothamus.

In Ashe's theory the Arthur of history was not the victor of Badon, hammer of the

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, p96

Saxons, but the leader of a British contingent defeated by the Goths in Gaul. Legend gathered around this man because of what he attempted. As the Roman world collapsed into ruin, its people longed for a *Restitutor Orbis*, a World Restorer, who would turn back the tide of decay, repel the barbarian invaders, and restore the Empire to its former glory. A number of great emperors did in fact perform this role, and though their victories proved temporary the hope remained green. Britain, separated from the Roman world, produced her own, insular version of that hope: "Arthur's legend is fundamentally the legend of a *Restitutor* in Britain."<sup>5</sup>

*The Discovery of King Arthur*, first published 1985, was a response to David Dumville's successful elimination of Arthur from history. Not everyone wanted to see him go. But Dumville's verdict had been accepted, there was no contemporary evidence for Arthur's existence, and without it his banishment must stand. Ashe presents us with an Arthur for whom there is contemporary evidence. There are letters addressed to Riothamus from Sidonius Apollinaris, the principal source for Gallic history in the period: his historicity is unimpeachable. And Riothamus has another, almost equally significant advantage - he is clearly Roman, another "last heroic bearer of the flame of Roman civilization against the black barbarian night".<sup>6</sup>

Ashe's theory has not gained academic approval but it has won widespread acceptance elsewhere. Its appeal is obvious, and graphically illustrated by the BBC's *Arthur, King of the Britons*. This programme gave us two possible 'real' Arthurs to consider, a brutal, hairy, sub-Roman Celtic warlord, the inverse of the romantic Arthur of legend, or this Riothamus, a Roman in Shining Armour reading philosophy in his campaign tent, a miniature British version of the great Marcus Aurelius. The regional channel Westcountry, in its examination of the Arthurian legend, removed the unknowable Celtic warlord from consideration: "The man seen as the last hope of a dying empire, he's the man about whom this huge body of myth would gather, not some obscure chieftain bopping a few Saxons here and there."

In Geoffrey Ashe's Arthur-Riothamus we have a figure who accords exactly with modern historical prejudice. The Enlightenment myth still holds sway in modern culture. Few doubt that the Fall of Rome was a Bad Thing, that Roman culture was unarguably superior to the native culture, that in Arthur's day there was nothing here worth fighting for, except Rome. But we know that was not the British opinion in Geoffrey's day. It certainly was not Geoffrey's opinion. And Geoffrey's history is the sole evidence for the identification of Arthur with Riothamus.

Geoffrey of Monmouth addresses himself to contemporary readers. He directs them to the Emperor Leo, and to the year 469-70, the year of Riothamus' continental adventure. But he could not have directed them to see this Roman Arthur, failed rescuer of a dying Empire, if for no other reason that in Geoffrey's day Rome, so far from having fallen in the fifth century, was still very much alive and kicking.

## **The Rebirths of Rome**

The Fall of Rome is a myth. So also is the *Translatio imperii*. But people see the world

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, contents, chapter 2

<sup>6</sup> Richard Barber, *The Figure of Arthur*, p17-18

though their myths. To see what Geoffrey is saying we have to discard the Enlightenment myth of Rome and view Geoffrey's story from a twelfth-century perspective.

Geoffrey addressed himself to readers who did not believe that the Roman Empire had fallen. The Roman Church taught that the empire was a necessary part of God's plan for salvation; the Christian message must spread to all world before the Last Days, and the Roman Empire was the Divinely chosen means of its dissemination. Medieval history acknowledged that there had been imperial set-backs: Rome might stagger, but she couldn't fall. Rome's ninth-century revival, the resurrection of the western Empire under Charlemagne, was the foundation myth of 'Frankish Europe', and a potent force in Geoffrey's day. It was vigorously promoted by the twelfth century Reformers as they orchestrated their own Roman revival.

Enlightenment myth knows of only one Roman Renaissance, that which began in Italy in the fifteenth century. The Medieval world knew of many, and Geoffrey's readers were living through one. The revival of Rome, to them, did not imply merely a cultural and intellectual revival, although it encompassed that. The Twelfth Century Renaissance, like the Carolingian but unlike the Italian, included a resurgence of Empire. It involved military aggression, the colonisation of barbarous regions and the reconquest of lost provinces. The expansion of Latin Christendom, in Geoffrey's day, was pursued at the expense of the Celtic regions, including that of his own people, the Britons. In conjunction with the military assault Rome waged a propaganda campaign depicting them as barbarians - a portrayal which Geoffrey's history was specifically intended to counter.

Geoffrey presents us with a picture of Rome quite illegitimately demanding tribute from Arthur. No historian today considers that anything like this could have happened in reality. But it would have made sense to Geoffrey's contemporaries. They would see at once that what he is describing is another Roman resurgence, the attempted reclamation of a lost province.

**Geoffrey directs us to the Emperor Leo.** In Geoffrey's story it is not Arthur but Leo who stands in the role of *Restitutor Orbis*. And it is an historical fact that there was a Roman revival in that period, an attempt to reassert Rome's power in the west; it was initiated by Leo, and it came to a climax in the year 469-70.

### **The Year 469-70**

It began with a dispute over the title of western Emperor. The post had stood vacant since the death of Severus in 465, after which Leo ruled as sole emperor of east and west. The western empire was then in decline and shrinking, but by no means lost. Parts of it were now under German control; the barbarian general Ricimer was the real power in Italy, and the Goths controlled Spain and Aquitaine. But these areas were still officially under Leo's authority. The areas actually lost to the Empire were Britain, northern Gaul, Dalmatia in the Balkans and North Africa. Britain seceded from the empire in 410, Dalmatia after the assassination of Aëtius, under his general Marcellinus. Procopius tells us Marcellinus "no longer deigned to yield obedience to

the emperor, but beginning a revolution and detaching all the others from allegiance, held the power of Dalmatia himself".<sup>7</sup> Northern Gaul was ruled another of Aëtius' generals, Aegidius. Appointed Master of Soldiers of Gaul by Emperor Majorian, on his assassination by Ricimer Aegidius declined to accept puppet emperor Ricimer elevated. But the only part of the western Empire which was actually lost to the Germans, at this date, was Augustine's homeland, now ruled by the Arian Vandals, whose independence was recognised by Emperor Valentinian back in 442. It was against Vandal Africa that Leo first directed his restoration.

The Vandals were not implacable foes of the Rome Empire. Like most Germans, they wanted power within it. When the Vandal king Gaiseric sacked Rome in 455 he was actually called in by Empress Eudoxia, widow of Valentinian III, and he took her with him when he returned to North Africa, along with her daughters. He married his son to one, the other was already married to the patrician Olybrius. It was Gaiseric's intention that Olybrius, his kinsman by marriage, should be emperor of the west. Leo refused to endorse his choice. Gaiseric thought to persuade him by raiding imperial territory. When he extended his predations to the eastern empire, to Greece and its islands, Leo reacted.

In 467 Leo appointed a western colleague, Anthemius, son-in-law to the previous eastern Emperor Marcian and at one time Leo's rival for the eastern throne. He sent him west with an army commanded by Marcellinus of Dalmatia, whom Leo had won over, according to Procopius, by "very careful wheedling".<sup>8</sup> Marcellinus was to lead the western army against the Vandals, whilst an eastern army came up from Egypt and the eastern fleet, under Leo's brother-in-law Basiliscus, attacked by sea. Meanwhile Anthemius was to destroy Gothic power in Gaul - the war against the Vandals became a war against the Arian heretics.

It was Anthemius who sent for Riothamus. He also seems to have recruited the forces of northern Gaul, now under Aegidius' son Syagrius. But not all the Gallo-Romans were on the side of Anthemius. His praetorian prefect in Gaul, Arvandus, was arraigned for treason and only escaped the death penalty through the intervention of powerful friends, including Sidonius Apollinaris who resigned his own government post rather than preside over Arvandus' trial. The evidence against him was compelling. His own secretary had testified that an intercepted letter was indeed dictated by him. It was addressed to Euric, the king of the Goths, urging him not to make peace with the Greek emperor but to attack the Britons north of the Loire, as the Law of Nations called for a division of Gaul between the Visigoths and the Burgundians. Riothamus was indeed brought down by treachery.

Anthemius' war in Gaul came to a climax in the year 469-70, the year Riothamus was destroyed. In Geoffrey's history it appears to be the year Arthur freed from Roman dominion all the western provinces except Italy. There is no mention in the historical record of Arthur's great victory over the Romans. But as for Rome's signal defeat, that is clearly recorded.

Leo's attempted restoration was an absolute failure, both against the Vandals in

<sup>7</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, III,6.7-8

<sup>8</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, III,6.7-8

Africa, and against the Goths in Gaul. The contemporary record describes its consequence for the Gallo-Romans. In a letter to his kinsman Ecdicius, dated to 470, Sidonius Apollinaris writes: "If the state is powerless to render aid, if, as rumour says, the emperor Anthemius is without resource, our nobility is determined to follow your lead, and give up their country or their hair",<sup>9</sup> that is, they have a choice between exile or church office. This was not rhetorical exaggeration, Sidonius himself became bishop of Clermont. This is what really brought down the Roman Empire in the west, not Alaric's sack of Rome, but Leo's war against the Goths. By the time it ended, "To all intents and purposes, all of the west except Italy now had been lost."<sup>10</sup>

When Geoffrey points to the year 470, this is what he wants us to see, for this is what his legal case required. Neither the crown of Britain, nor any of the continental lands Robert stood to inherit from his father, could be legally subject to Roman overlordship. The Roman Church could not have inherited such dominion from the empire, because the empire, which gained those lands by force of arms, had lost them by the same means. Geoffrey's case rests on the history that really did happen.

### **The Mighty Shadow**

Geoffrey knows his history. Once dismissed as a fraud, some now prefer to see him as a romancer, but this is scarcely nearer the mark. In the eyes of many academics he still stands condemned for inserting Arthur into history where of course he shouldn't be - an unscrupulous cleric fooling his ignorant lay contemporaries. But who was fooled? In his own day, just as now, the argument was put forward that Arthur could not be history, for had there ever been such a mighty champion we would find him in the written record. But those who made this case in Geoffrey's day were not honest academics in pursuit of the historical truth. They had their own reasons for denouncing Geoffrey as a fraud, and denying Arthur's historicity. And if historians today overlook the fact, Geoffrey's target readership would be well aware that the written record in which the Britons' hero doesn't appear had passed through the hands of their opponents.

The nature of Geoffrey's history isn't the point. He never asked anyone to take him at his word, he didn't require us to credit a British tradition we have no access to, his legal case directs us to known history, the history admitted, preserved and promoted by his opponents; the history that is still with us today. The events of 470 are still there in the record we have inherited, they still prove the case he made. But do they prove his Arthur?

In the aftermath of John Morris' hereticisation, historians look at the record and they see no Arthur. Morris called him "a mighty shadow, a figure looming large behind every record of his time, yet never clearly seen."<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Ashe contends that "anyone so mighty ought surely to be recorded somewhere, and 'clearly seen' at some point."<sup>12</sup> Regarding Morris' Roman Arthur, who fought to "restore and revive the Roman Empire

<sup>9</sup> *Epist.* 2.1.4, see Ralph W. Mathisen, *Anthemius*

<sup>10</sup> Ralph W. Mathisen, *Anthemius*

<sup>11</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p116

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, p84

in Britain”<sup>13</sup> that might well be true. But what of Geoffrey’s Arthur, Rome’s enemy?

No historian has glimpsed that figure. But where has anyone looked for him? And how would a mighty shadow be clearly seen against the pitch-black of the British Dark Ages? Geoffrey does not ask us to take anything on trust. He directs us to the record. And he directs us to look for the most famous king of the Britons, not in the obscured history of sub-Roman Britain, but in the known history of the later Roman Empire, in the struggle for Gaul. So if we change the backdrop, does the figure of Arthur reappear?

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<sup>13</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p117



## Chapter 15

### The Battle for Gaul

*She [Rome] alone welcomed the conquered to her bosom,  
fostered mankind with a common name, a Mother,  
no Empress, calling the tamed to citizenship  
and uniting sundered folk in a loving faith.*

*We all of us owe to her the rule of peace that still  
the world, wherever we roam, our home we meet*

*Claudian, Egyptian born Roman poet, 4th-5th century<sup>14</sup>*

*Are you surprised at not being able to defeat the Goths when the  
Roman people of Gaul prefer to live with them than with you, Romans?  
... Are you surprised at seeing our towns taken and destroyed when for  
a long time we have prepared this disaster by the oppression of the  
masses of the people? In reducing our fellow-citizens to captivity, we  
have prepared our own loss of liberty.*

*Salvian, Gallic Christian writer, 5th century.<sup>15</sup>*

#### The Last Gallic Emperor

The history of Britain, according to the current consensus, disappears into a black hole in the fifth century. The history of Gaul does not.

The century opens with Britain fully a part of the Empire, though with the advantage of hindsight we can see ominous signs in the very first years. In 403 Stilicho, in order to defend Italy from Alaric's Goths, withdrew troops from Britain and the Rhine frontier. The Gallic prefecture faced the barbarian threat with a weakened defence system. In 406 numerous Germanic peoples took the opportunity to cross the Rhine into the Empire. As Vandals, Alans and Suevi fanned out across Gaul, Britain elected three usurpers in rapid succession, Marcus, Gratian, and finally Constantine.

Constantine III was the last Roman Emperor to be raised to the purple in Britain, and the last to rule both Britain and the wider Gallic prefecture. In British tradition he is overshadowed completely by Magnus Maximus, the symbol of kingly legitimacy who "killed the king of the Romans", the villain of Gildas' history whose revolt caused the fatal separation of the Roman Island from its faithful parent. He was executed by Emperor Theodosius in 388. The western Empire was restored to the Arian Valentinian, but he remained in the power of his Master of Soldiers Arbogastes, whom Theodosius had appointed, until his death in 392 - which may have been suicide or murder, historians disagree. Arbogastes replaced him with Flavius Eugenius, whose rule saw the last serious attempt at reviving Roman paganism. But the Frank general

<sup>14</sup> *Stilicho's Consulship*, from Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p105

<sup>15</sup> *On the Government of God, V*, from Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p115

and his pagan Emperor were overthrown by the rigorously orthodox Theodosius, who then made his own younger son Honorius emperor of the west. Honorius was the western Emperor when Constantine III crossed into Gaul.

Constantine's rule was swiftly accepted by Gaul and Spain. Honorius' first attempts to destroy him were thwarted by Gerontius, Constantine's Master of Soldiers, who then moved to secure Spain. A revolt there led by relatives of Honorius was crushed, the rebels killed. But Constantine's power soon began to disintegrate. Gerontius turned against him and nominated another Emperor Maximus. The German tribes who had fled from him into Spain began migrating back into Gaul. Some British officials renounced his authority and wrote to Honorius. Constantine attempted to shore up his position by making peace with Honorius. He apologised for killing his relatives and offered assistance against Alaric, and in 409 Honorius recognised him as co-Emperor. But he was never trusted in Ravenna, and when in the summer of 410 he crossed the Alps to engage Alaric, Honorius executed his own *magister equitum*, Allobich, for conspiring with him. Constantine retreated back to Gaul. Once illness had disposed of Alaric, Honorius' general Constantius crossed into Gaul and defeated Gerontius and Constantine in turn. The head of the last British usurper was exhibited in Ravenna on the 18th September, 411.

The Gallic prefecture did not immediately resign itself to the restoration of Italian rule. After Constantine's defeat the Gallic aristocracy raised Jovinus, one of their number, to the purple, and in 412 he acclaimed his brother Sebastianus co-emperor. They were both defeated and executed and their heads sent to Ravenna in late August of 413.

But the elimination of Gallic emperors did not amount to an Imperial recovery of Gaul. During Constantine's rule, and because of his neglect of the government, according to Zosimus, all Britain and Armorica and some other Gallic provinces rose up and freed themselves of both the barbarians and the Romans, and set up independent native governments.

Fifth-century history is still written from an Enlightenment perspective. Rome's 'withdrawal' from Britain was swiftly followed by Britain's collapse into barbarity, as the inhabitants failed to maintain *Romanitas* and the German immigrants overthrew their dominion. Gaul experienced the same process, but more slowly, as the German barbarians gradually replaced a disintegrating imperial power. Up to the middle of the fifth century, when the Master of Soldiers Aëtius withstood a Hunnish invasion, the western Empire still held together, and still held Gaul. The year 455 is regarded as a turning point, for in that year the emperor Valentinian III, grandson of Theodosius and the last 'legitimate' western emperor, was assassinated. Those who followed Valentinian are known as the 'shadow emperors' because they were never able to establish themselves as independent rulers of the west but ruled only with the support of barbarian generals and the eastern Emperors, and then only briefly. The last of them, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the German Odovacer in 476. *Muir's Historical Atlas*<sup>16</sup> for that year shows the surviving territories of the Roman Empire, in

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<sup>16</sup> see below, p91

pink, as two separate blocks. The largest, the territory divided by Diocletian into the prefectures of Illyria and the East and which Theodosius left to his elder son Arcadius, remains with its boundaries little changed since the time of Augustus. Of the west, the region Honorius inherited, all that remains is a part of northern Gaul, marked 'Roman Empire (under Syagrius)'. In the next map, dated 526, that too has disappeared. The Roman pink still covers the east, but the entire west is marked out to the Germanic kingdoms of the Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, Ostrogoths, Burgundians, etc. The Gallo-Roman kingdom of Aegidius and Syagrius fell to the Frank king Clovis in 486. The struggle was over before the end of the century. The Western Roman Empire gave place to German rule.

But this is too simplistic. For one thing, the battle for the west was not simply a struggle between Romans and Germans. The conventional view leaves one significant grouping out of the picture entirely: the natives.

### **The Bacaudae**

The idea of Rome as the benign mother of the conquered nations, holding them together by a bond of peace, prosperity and brotherhood, is an image which might please classical poets and Christian apologists comfortably ensconced within the system they praised, but it is one which never had much currency at the bottom end of the social spectrum.

Those invited to enjoy the fruits of empire were always a minority. For the majority, Roman conquest meant, sooner rather than later, a descent into extreme poverty under a burden of oppressive taxation and discriminatory law. The Roman system had always relied on forced labour. In the early days the slaves made up one third of its population. As the Empire reached the limits of expansion and the supply of prisoners of war dried up, other expedients were resorted to. The Roman population was divided in two, the *Honestiores* and the *Humiliores*, with the latter reduced to a semi-servile condition and subject to penalties, such as torture, which had once been reserved for slaves. The natural response of these brutally oppressed peoples was to try to overthrow Roman rule whenever an opportunity presented itself, and that despite the awful consequences attendant on failure. The slave revolt of Spartacus ended with 6,000 crucified. Thousands died in the Judaeen revolt of 70 AD, including all the defenders of Masada, the last fortress to hold out, who committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. In Britain and Gaul in the early fifth century, as the imperial power visibly collapsed and barbarians streamed across the frontiers, the native populations seized their opportunity and rose up in a revolt which the Romans termed a *bacauda*, and characterised as an act of pure brigandage. We would call it a peasants' revolt.

This section of society seldom makes it into the historical record, and Roman writers were reluctant to talk about the 'ignoble' struggle against such a foe, but so great was their impact on the security of the Empire that we do learn something of the *bacaudae*. British tradition treasured the memory of having thrown off Roman rule "because of the weight of the Empire". Zosimus tells us the rebels no longer

submitted to Roman law and a Gallic playwright provides us with a glimpse of what they replaced it with: "Folk live there by the Law of Nature. No guile. Capital sentences are pronounced under the Oak and written down on bones. Peasants are lawyers, ordinary citizens judge."<sup>17</sup> Jack Lindsay points up the parallel with Ket's revolt in East Anglia in 1549, when the victims of enclosures broke down the fences and hedges and tried the landlords under the Great Oak. Salvian tells us the cause of the *Bacaudae* was the brutal injustice and legalised rapine to which the ruling class subjected the ruled. They have made the Roman name so hated people shun it; they flee to avoid the taxman, leaving behind huts and plots of ground which they long to take with them, but since they cannot do what they will they do what they can; they escape to the *Bacaudae* or to the barbarians; even persons of no obscure birth and who have received a liberal education find themselves forced to flee from the state's persecution.

The intention of the *bacaudae* was to throw off the Roman yoke. This is stated explicitly by Zosimus and admitted by contemporary Gallic sources which speak of the suppression of the revolt as the Restoration of Roman Rule. But the Gallic rebels against Rome were not all poor. Both Salvian and the Gallic playwright testify to their being joined by the well-born, the educated, even the rich. In a time of political upheaval and religious suppression, when confiscation and exile were standard penalties, it cannot have been uncommon for members of the class which benefited from Roman rule to suddenly find themselves, personally, obliged to regard the Roman state as their enemy. And then there were the religious idealists. From the time of St. Martin we have evidence in the Gallic prefecture of a radical Christian monastic movement which was deeply sympathetic to the plight of the poor and critical of, if not downright hostile towards, the Roman state and its Church.

The simplistic view of the fall of Rome, with Romans and Germans struggling for dominion over the western empire, distorts our understanding of the actual history of the period. It is this view that lies behind the concept of the Roman 'withdrawal' from Britain, the idea that Rome abandoned the island and so left it open to the Saxons, whose dominion somehow did not become effective for another two centuries. So we have 200 years of nothing, a 'transitory period' which is not really part of history at all. But Britain was not 'abandoned' by Rome's decision. There was a third force. The record says that the Britons themselves expelled the Romans. But which Britons?

In the days before sub-Roman Britain was deemed too dark to have a political history, historians thought they could discern two factions operating in the first decades of the fifth century. On the one side was the Roman orthodox faction of the great magnates, headed by Ambrosius. On the other there was a Pelagian Independence faction which eventually brought Vortigern to power, and which was responsible for the original breach with Rome. E A Thompson ridicules this notion. The Pelagian heresy could have had no influence on the British revolt because Pelagius was not then a heretic. "Yet some British scholars appear to think that far-sighted British theologians of a political cast of mind not only grasped the implications

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<sup>17</sup> *Querolus* - see Jack Lindsay *Arthur and his Times*, p121

of Pelagius's teachings but actually formed political 'parties' to uphold or oppose those teachings before 410. *Before 410!* That is to say, they did so some years before the dull-witted St Augustine of Hippo was able to grasp that Pelagius's teachings were unorthodox! And these British theologians - or should we call them 'clairvoyants'? - attached themselves respectively to anti-Roman and pro-Roman parties." **But Thompson has the whole thing the wrong way up.** Augustine didn't 'grasp' that Pelagius teachings were heretical, he and his supporters made them heretical, in the teeth of four centuries of Christian tradition. The political implications of those teachings were exactly the same before hereticisation as after, and **it was precisely on the grounds of their political implications that the Emperor had Pelagius' teachings hereticised** - they were held responsible for a bout of political unrest in the city of Rome. Now if the Roman state itself thought an uneducated Roman mob could grasp the implications of this radical Christianity, prior to its being hereticised, it seems hardly logical to argue that Pelagius' educated countrymen were not capable of doing the same.

The available evidence shows that the British revolt against Rome, though it clearly involved the peasantry, was not an overthrow of the entire ruling elite and did not result in a total collapse into anarchy that might explain Britain's disappearance from history and knowledge itself being wiped from men's minds. Nor is there a total separation of British and Gallic history at this stage. **The goal of the rebels was not an independent Britain but independence from Rome.** The revolt began in Britain but soon spread to the whole of Armorica and many other Gallic provinces, according to our sources. The difference is that Gaul was retaken, and Britain was not.

### **The Western Succession**

In 417 the noble Rutilius celebrated the Restoration of Roman Rule to Armorica with a poem in praise of his relative Exuperantius, who "gave the charms of peace back to Armoric folk. Law he restored and Liberty he saved; and slaves who had made free men slaves, he broke."<sup>18</sup> It was not to last.

In the same year the Goths, having surrendered to Constantius, were stationed in Aquitaine as a defence against the *baicaudae* north of Loire. As part of the deal they returned the Emperor's sister Galla Placidia, taken captive during Alaric's siege of Rome, later married to his brother-in-law and successor Athaulf, and widowed in 415. Honorius married her to Constantius.

In 418, on the 30th April, the Emperor moved against the Pelagians in Rome, ordering their immediate expulsion and that of any who supported them, along with the confiscation of all their goods.

**In the same year the Romans launched a tax raid on Britain,** if the Anglo-Saxon chronicle is to be believed. 'Nennius' would seem to concur, and the story does make sense. Having recovered northern Gaul it is only to be expected that the Romans would make an attempt on Britain.

In 419 a son was born to Galla Placidia and Constantius; the future emperor

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<sup>18</sup> see Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p120

Valentinian. In 421, in February, Honorius acclaimed Constantius his co-Emperor, but the eastern Emperor, Theodosius, refused to acknowledge his elevation. Constantius is reported to have been planning a campaign against Theodosius to avenge the insult when he died in the September of that same year. Soon after, his widow Galla Placidia quarrelled with Honorius and fled with her children to the protection of her nephew Theodosius.

In 423 Honorius died. A Roman noble named Ioannes was raised to the purple by Castinus, the Master of Soldiers, and Aëtius - a rising star, son of an earlier Master of Soldiers, who had spent some time as a hostage among the Huns and had since made them his allies. Ioannes was acknowledged in Gaul, Spain and Italy, but not in Africa, and not by the east. In 425 Theodosius sent an expedition to place the six year old Valentinian on the western Imperial throne. Ioannes was taken captive by treachery, mutilated and executed. Three days later Aëtius arrived in Italy with a large force of Huns. Too late to save Ioannes, he was persuaded to accept the situation with bribe of gold for his Huns and the title of count.

In the year of Valentinian's accession, 425, in July, the Pelagian bishops of Gaul were ordered to renounce their errors within twenty days before the bishop of Arles or fall under the displeasure of the prefect. This was also, according to 'Nennius', the year of Vortigern's accession. In the fourth year of Vortigern's reign the Saxons came to Britain, during the consulship of Felix and Taurus, that is, in 428.

In 429, at the suggestion of deacon Palladius, Pope Celestine sent bishop Germanus of Auxerre to Britain, to counter the Pelagian heresy with which Agricola, the son of bishop Severianus, had corrupted the British Church, according to Prosper of Aquitaine. Orthodoxy was restored, and restored again in 431 by Palladius himself, now bishop of the Irish, and then once more by Germanus. His biographer Constantius does not date Germanus' second mission, but we can: it ended in 437.

From 425 to 437, the year Valentinian came of age, the west was ruled by Galla Placidia as her son's regent. Aëtius was her main rival for power. She chose another general, Felix, as successor to Castinus and in 430 Aëtius had him murdered, though one account makes it self-defence, saying Galla Placidia had ordered Felix to kill Aëtius. Aëtius became the Master of Soldiers, and Galla Placidia called in Count Boniface of Africa against him. Boniface had originally been Galla Placidia's ally and had refused recognition to Ioannes, though the two had since fallen out. In 427 he had declared independence and, when Galla Placidia sent troops against him, invited the Vandals into Africa. But the Vandal threat became so great it had forced a reconciliation between the two, and in 432 Boniface returned to Italy to be made Master of Soldiers in place of Aëtius. When Aëtius attempted to resist by force, Boniface defeated him and he had to flee to the Huns. But Boniface soon after died, and Aëtius, with Hunnish backing, forced Galla Placidia to reinstate him as Master of Soldiers in 433. He held on to power from then until his death in 454.

In 437 Valentinian came of age and married Eudoxia, daughter of Emperor Theodosius to whom he had been engaged since 424. But the real power in the west still lay with Aëtius. Even foreign embassies were sent to him and made treaties with

him. When Saint Germanus halted the Alan king Goar on his way to slaughter *bacaudae*, Goar only agreed to the truce on condition it was ratified by the emperor and by Aëtius. This was in 437, the year Germanus died in Italy and Tibatto was captured and executed.

### **Tibatto's Revolt**

The second revolt of northern Gaul began in 435, according to the Gallic Chronicler, under the leadership of Tibatto, and practically all the slaves of Gaul joined in the movement. It was suppressed in 437, Tibatto was taken prisoner and all the other leaders of the revolt were defeated or slaughtered.

It was in the spring of that year that Germanus landed in Gaul, in Armorica. His biographer Constantius tells us he was met by a deputation pleading with him to check the advance of the Alans, who were about to descend on the insolent and arrogant folk. Germanus succeeded in brokering a truce but it was broken by the *Bacaudae* who thereafter 'paid the penalty' - Constantius has no peasant sympathies.

But who approached Germanus? Thompson thinks it noteworthy that the rebels, seceding from the Empire, were still "not above using as an intermediary a bishop who had by no means seceded from the Empire and indeed was an ex-official of that Empire!"<sup>19</sup> But as Jack Lindsay pointed out, it is more likely that it was the landlords who approached Germanus, rather than the peasants who were clearly not prepared to end the revolt.<sup>20</sup> And the landlords had much to lose. The settlement of barbarians on their estates entailed a loss of two-thirds of their arable land and one half of their woodland and pasture.<sup>21</sup> That the Roman authorities were prepared to countenance such an arrangement - a substantial reduction in the incomes not only to private landlords but also to the treasury (since the *foederati* were not, apparently, subject to Roman taxes)<sup>22</sup> - illustrates just how great a threat the *bacaudae* represented. But Goar and his Alans may have posed an even greater threat to the landlords' incomes: the loss of labour.

Crushing a revolt among people who had nothing to gain from surrender to the Roman system must have resulted in a massacre. We do have evidence for depopulation. British migrants to Brittany are described, in Breton saints' *Lives*, as moving into a deserted country, "a land of ghosts, far emptier than Britain".<sup>23</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris appeals to Riothamus on behalf of a 'penniless rustic' whose slaves are being secretly lured away by the Britons - a clear indication of a labour shortage. Observing the hatred and contempt expressed by some Roman writers towards the *bacaudae*, genocide would not be surprising. Perhaps this is what is in Gildas' mind when he describes the aftermath of Boudicca's revolt: "So the Romans slaughtered the treasonable, keeping a few as slaves to that the land should not be completely

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<sup>19</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p62

<sup>20</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p168

<sup>21</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p170

<sup>22</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p169

<sup>23</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p253

deserted.”<sup>24</sup>

Britain's revolt from Roman rule was, in the eyes of E A Thompson, simply another *bacauda*. But this one was a success - Britain was never retaken. In 441, however, the Saxon federates in Britain revolted. Though Gildas would have us believe otherwise, it must have been this which caused the Britons to write to Aëtius. And it could only have been the most Romanised section of the population who wrote to him, as they were the only group with anything to hope for from Aëtius' intervention. They got no help, Gildas tells us, and Bede explains why. Aëtius was already engaged in two serious wars against the Huns, who threatened all Europe.

### **The Rescue of Europe**

The Huns were a nomadic Mongoloid people whose westward migration from Asia, driving the Germanic tribes of eastern Europe before them, was a principal cause of the instability of this period. By the 440s Hunnic tribes occupied a vast area north of the Black Sea encompassing all modern Hungary, Romania and southern Russia. They had been for some decades the allies of Aëtius and the source of his power. But in 444 they united under one king, Attila, who was so confident of his power that he demanded the hand of Emperor Valentinian's sister, Honoria, in marriage - with half the western Empire as her dowry. When Honorius refused, Attila led an army across the Rhine into Gaul and laid siege to Orléans.

This was a threat not only to Roman authority but to all who held power or position in the western Empire, including all the Germanic peoples now settled as federates among the Roman population. It was the Huns who had originally forced the Visigoths over the Empire's borders, and it was the Visigoths, under King Theodoric, who proved the staunchest allies of Aëtius in this epic struggle. Driven from Orléans, Attila was brought to battle on the Mauriac plain in 451. The battle left Theodoric dead, and Attila still at large. However he withdrew with his Huns back across the Rhine.

The following year Attila again broke through the frontiers, pressing his claim for the Princess and a share of the Empire, but this time he invaded Italy. Disease and famine, the arrival of troops from the eastern Empire, and the intervention of Pope Leo the Great persuaded him to withdraw without occupying Rome. Ecclesiastical legend adds SS. Peter and Paul to the list of persuaders. Still in the hope of marrying Honoria Attila died, in 453, and his empire quickly disintegrated.

In 454 Aëtius, the saviour of the west, was murdered by the emperor Valentinian. By eliminating a too mighty subject Valentinian doubtless thought to add the authority of a western Emperor to the title he had so long possessed. But he miscalculated. He was assassinated himself the following year by adherents of Aëtius in his own bodyguard. The dynasty of Theodosius the Great was extinguished in the west, and we enter the era of the shadow emperors. The first of them, Maximus, lasted for just a couple of months - from the 17th March to the 22nd May, 455. He attempted to secure his position by forcibly marrying Valentinian's widow, the Empress Eudoxia. Her response was to call in the Vandals under King Gaiseric, who slew Maximus and returned to

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<sup>24</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 7



Africa with a train of booty and captives, including the Empress and her two daughters, one of whom he married to his son Huneric, the other being married already to the patrician Olybrius, whose claim to the western empire he was later to champion. Meanwhile Maximus had sent one of his supporters, Avitus, a Gallic nobleman, back to Gaul to secure the support of the Goths. He got it. With Maximus dead, the Goths raised Avitus to the purple.

### **The Gothic Alliance**

Avitus didn't last long. He was proclaimed Emperor in Arles on the 9th or 10th of July 455 by the Gallic nobility. The Roman senate accepted him, the eastern Empire did not. He arrived in Italy on the 21st September and on January 1st, 456, he entered the consulate. On this occasion his son-in-law, Sidonius Apollinaris, delivered a panegyric summarising his achievements to date: "a work which in essence is a history of the Gallo-Roman endeavours to bolster Gaul's political power with the help of the Goths."<sup>25</sup> He was deposed in the October of that same year, but the Gothic alliance proved rather more enduring. From the mid-fifth century up to Leo's restoration it was the principal feature of Gallic politics.

Over the course of half a century the Visigoths had been transformed from enemies who sacked the ancient capital of Rome to allies on whom the safety of Gaul depended. Sidonius' early writings repeatedly stress the importance of the *foedus*, the alliance with the Goths, and of the Goths' status as *foederati*. The Visigoths had been Roman federates since 418, but it was the battle against the Huns, in which King Theodoric lost his life, that had elevated them to this new status as the most favoured and trusted barbarians in Gaul.

Leo's restoration changed all that, and the change is epitomised in Sidonius' writings. They were published in his lifetime, the first section, his panegyrics and first book of letters, before 469, and the next eight books of letters after 476, by which time he was bishop of Clermont in central Gaul. The second collection is an apology for the first, written after Leo's crusade against the Arians, when the Goths had become, in Sidonius' description, the *foedifraga gens*, the treaty-breaking race. The first collection was written when the alliance still held.<sup>26</sup> It reveals the earlier ambition of Sidonius' group - all patriotic Gallo-Roman nobles - to transform Gaul into the major political power in the west with the aid of those loyal Gothic allies.

The elevation of Avitus was intended to restore the western empire by placing it under Gallic control. A poem of Sidonius states this plainly:

Lately a rich chance glittered out  
while Maximus grasped the panicked City: Gaul  
might then have shown her thews, have owned the world  
if, you as master, she'd regained her rights.

Avitus is here presented as the logical heir to Aëtius, under whom he'd served, for

<sup>25</sup> Eric J Goldberg, *The Fall of the Roman Empire Revisited: Sidonius Apollinaris and His Crisis of Identity*

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Sidonius credits him with having played a crucial role in forming the pan-Gallic alliance which stopped Attila. He ends the poem with a plea:

why check your country's will?  
Now she commands you to command. We each  
cry out: Be Lord, then I'll be free<sup>27</sup>

The Gallic hope in Avitus was swiftly disappointed. After barely a year in office, destabilised by famine in Italy and having unwisely dismissed his loyal troops, he was overthrown by the Italian generals, Majorian and Ricimer. Majorian was an earlier candidate for the purple, favoured by the empress Eudoxia to succeed her murdered husband Valentinian. Ricimer was a German general of Suevic and Gothic ancestry who, on the overthrow of Avitus, became the power behind the throne until his death in 472, making and unmaking emperors - including Majorian.

After Avitus, there are hints of another Gallic attempt at elevating an emperor. Sidonius darkly refers to a "Marcellan conspiracy for seizing the diadem", but nothing more is known. Gaul came to accept Majorian. Sidonius delivered a panegyric to him, in early January 459, now our principal source for Majorian's early life. Majorian himself made every effort to conciliate the Gallo-Roman nobles, and appointed one of them, Aegidius, an old comrade of his, to be Master of Soldiers of Gaul. He also won the support of the Visigoths. But his attempt to reform the imperial finances lost him the support of the Roman Senate, and his rule lasted only four years. While travelling from Gaul to Italy he was set upon by Ricimer, stripped of his imperial regalia, beaten and beheaded, in late July, 461. Ricimer then elevated Severus, who was acceptable to the Senate but not to the eastern Emperor nor to the rest of the west. His rule in reality extended no further than Italy. The Gauls, and their Gothic allies, were effectively independent.

### **The Arian Dominion**

This comfortable situation was brought to an end by an outside intervention - Emperor Leo's failed Roman restoration. This was not an absolute disaster for all participants. Indeed for Leo there were definite gains: "he had managed to rid himself of three powerful rivals, the Masters of Soldiers Anthemius, Aspar, and Marcellinus, and to disgrace another, Basiliscus."<sup>28</sup> But for the rulers of the west, and in particular for the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, it was a catastrophe. Previously secure, with Gothic support, in the possession of their lands and dignities, they now found themselves forced to choose between exile or the Church.

Sidonius Apollinaris chose the Church. It was as bishop of Clermont he published his later letters, renouncing the error so prominent in his earlier works, the alliance with the Arian Goths, once apparently a wise and fruitful strategy but now a source of remorse. But a detail of history shows this may be a diplomatic confession, and that his real feelings were rather more complex.

<sup>27</sup> *Carmen 7* - see Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p196

<sup>28</sup> Ralph W. Mathisen, *Anthemius*

The notion of Arthur as a cavalry captain was once supported by reference to the case of Ecdicius. Ecdicius was the son of the Emperor Avitus, brother-in-law to Sidonius. A letter of Sidonius, written around 474, commemorates a victory Ecdicius won at Clermont, in which, with only eighteen men under him, he routed a Gothic force of thousands. Ecdicius' startling success was, it seems, due to his leading a heavily armed, mounted force against poorly equipped infantry. John Morris remarks that the incident was not repeated in Gaul, that Ecdicius' triumph did not spark a campaign, because the Gallo-Roman nobility did not have the political will for an all-out war against the barbarians. But history provides a further, illuminating detail.

Sidonius, having chosen to lose his hair rather than his country, made every effort to appear a reputable bishop. The man who had previously sullied his mouth with the praise of Arian heretics now busied himself reading scripture and writing to his fellow bishops. One of his letters is to Graecus of Marseilles, one of the four bishops sent by Emperor Nepos on an embassy to the Gothic king Euric. Sidonius writes in praise of the bishops' efforts: "Through you delegations come and go; to you, first of all, in the absence of the emperor, peace is not only reported when it has been negotiated, it is even entrusted to be negotiated". But he was then shocked to discover that the episcopal embassy had ceded the Auvergne to the Goths in return for Provence, a territory more conveniently close to Italy.<sup>29</sup>

Leo's failed crusade against the Arians had the effect of expanding the heretics' dominion to cover almost the entire western Empire. The Visigothic territory now covered all of south west Gaul and most of Spain - not as a region under the protection of federates but as an independent kingdom outside the Empire. The Burgundians in central Gaul were also Arians. The Arian Vandals defeated Leo's forces on sea and land, and remained secure in their possession of North Africa. In Italy the German Ricimer killed Anthemius and raised in his place Olybrius, son-in-law to the Vandal king, whose imperial candidature had originally sparked the crusade. With their deaths in 472 power devolved to another German, Odovacer, who was to depose the last western Emperor and rule himself as, effectively, King of Italy, though the Eastern Empire recognised him under the title of Patrician. With eastern Gaul occupied by the pagan Franks and the Alamans, the only parts of the west which hadn't now 'fallen to the barbarians' were the Gallo-Roman kingdom of Aegidius and Syagrius, and Britain.

### **The Fall of Syagrius**

After the Gallic Chronicler's brief mention of the events of 441, no continental writer has anything to tell us of Britain in the fifth century. Some historians are prepared to believe this silence rests on ignorance, that even our near neighbours in Gaul knew nothing whatever of insular British affairs in the later fifth century, and that the impenetrable mist of the British Dark Ages had already descended between this island and the wider world. Yet in 469-70 a British force was operating on the Continent in co-operation with a Roman Emperor appointed by Byzantium. The Goth

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<sup>29</sup> see Ralph W. Mathisen, *Nepos*

historian Jordanes, writing in the mid-sixth century, says the British king Riothamus came to Anthemius' aid "by way of the ocean", which suggests he came from mainland Britain though of course it still could mean Brittany. But clearly the British were sufficiently known and accessible for an Emperor to get a message through to their leader, and sufficiently far from Dark Age collapse to be able to respond, with a force of 12,000.

Britain's Dark Age isolation is clearly a myth. We have irrefutable evidence that Britain in this period was engaged in an extensive trade with countries as far away as Egypt and Syria. There was a massive British presence on the Continent in the second half of the century, quite apart from Riothamus' military expedition. British immigrants were so numerous in the western half of Armorica that they gave the area a new name, Brittany. A scattering of Brettevilles in the eastern half, in what became Normandy, show they settled here too. John Morris suggests the Normandy Brettevilles mark the settlements of British migrants who were welcomed by Aegidius and given estates in his territory.

In the last quarter of the fifth century only two areas of the Gallic prefecture remained independent. They shared a common history and culture and they were near neighbours. Clearly they would have been in contact with each other, and the likelihood is that they were allies.

Before the end of the century the Gallo-Roman kingdom of Aegidius had ceased to be. His son and heir Syagrius was defeated in battle by the Frank king Clovis, and his territory absorbed into the kingdom of the Franks. In Morris' view this was one of the two factors which doomed the Roman revival of Arthur and Ambrosius. If the Brittany migrants had not despaired of their homeland too soon, if they had stayed to fight for the island, or if the Gallo-Roman kingdom of Aegidius and Syagrius had survived long enough to unite with a victorious Britain, then we might have seen an Empire in the north quite as Roman as Byzantium in the east, ruled from a London as Imperial as Constantinople. The Britons began their war of resistance against the Saxons when the grandson of Theodosius was still emperor of the west. Throughout much of the period it was prosecuted the last remnant of Roman Gaul was still standing. But by the time of Badon Britain stood alone. With Clovis' conquest, as *Muir's Historical Atlas*<sup>30</sup> depicts it, the last pink blob of the Imperial west is submerged under the green of the Frankish kingdom.

But that's not the only way to look at it.

### **Leo and Childeric**

We have evidence in the written record that the contemporary Roman view of the independent Gallo-Roman kingdom was not identical to the later Enlightenment view, as pictured in *Muir's Historical Atlas*. Muir's map for 476 AD shows an island of pink, labelled 'Roman Empire (under Syagrius), surviving above the German flood. But in the view of the Eastern Empire there was no Roman island and no German flood. There were Germans and Germans, and Byzantium was well used to making strange

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<sup>30</sup> see below, p91

alliances in its quest to control the west. A historian specialising in the early Frankish period sees evidence for Byzantine involvement with the kings of the Franks predating the fall of Syagrius.

Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks, was not the first of his dynasty to ally with the Romans. The Meroveus, or Merovech, who gave his name to the Merovingian dynasty, reputedly fought with Aëtius against the Huns. More concrete is the relationship between the Romans and Childeric, Clovis' father, detailed in Wallace-Hadrill's *The Long-Haired Kings*.

Childeric was king of the Franks until his death in 481 or 482, when his more famous son succeeded him. The date of his accession is not known for certain, but is thought to be around 456. But Childeric did not enjoy an uninterrupted reign. Wallace-Hadrill details two versions of the story of Childeric's deposition and reinstatement, recounted in the surviving written record. Gregory of Tours tells us he was banished by his own people, for his wantonness - this is thought to be a hint at the royal polygamy still practised by later Merovingians. According to Gregory he spent his exile in Thuringia, the original homeland of his people, and the Franks then chose to be ruled by Aegidius. But before leaving Childeric made arrangements for his return. He left behind a loyal friend who would work to reconcile the Franks with their true king. The two men divided a coin between them. When the friend sent Childeric his half of the coin, he would know that the time was ripe. The signal came after eight years, and Childeric returned from Thuringia to reclaim his throne. But another historian tells a slightly different tale. A Burgundian chronicle credited to one **Fredegar names the friend, Wiomad the Hun, and tells us Childeric spent his exile, not in Thuringia, but in Byzantium.**

Fredegar wrote some decades after Gregory, but although later in time his information is not necessarily less reliable. As Wallace-Hadrill points out, Fredegar had contacts in the Burgundian court, and that gave him greater access to information on Byzantine affairs than Gregory could acquire in Tours. Fredegar's tale takes Childeric to Byzantium and brings him back with a large subsidy from the Emperor. Wallace-Hadrill thinks historical fact underlies this tale: "Even if Childeric never did go to Constantinople, may we not suppose that he could have been in the pay of Byzantium? What more likely than that the imperial court, finding him at loggerheads with Aegidius, should choose to support him against the latter? There is no reason why the rule of Aegidius should have pleased Byzantium more than that of the chieftain of a trusted federate people. On this interpretation, Aegidius was a rebel, and Childeric owed his rule in Gaul in part, at least, to imperial backing."<sup>31</sup>

Imperial backing means Leo, since Gregory gives us enough information to date Childeric's return from exile:

Childeric fought at Orléans and Odovacer came with the Saxons to Angers. At that time a great plague destroyed the people. Aegidius died and left a son, Syagrius by name. On his death Odovacer received hostages from Angers and

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<sup>31</sup> J M Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*, p162

other places. The British were driven from Bourges by the Goths, and many were slain at the village of Déols. Count Paul with the Romans and Franks made war on the Goths and took booty. When Odovacer came to Angers, king Childeric came on the following day, and slew count Paul, and took the city. In a great fire on that day the house of the bishop was burned.

After this war was waged between the Saxons and the Romans but the Saxons fled and left many of their people to be slain, the Romans pursuing. Their islands were captured and ravaged by the Franks, and many were slain. In the ninth month of that year, there was an earthquake. Odovacer made an alliance with Childeric, and they subdued the Alamanni, who had overrun that part of Italy.<sup>32</sup>

As John Morris remarks, the complexity of events must have dazed contemporaries almost as much as the modern reader.<sup>33</sup> But given the context we can work out what is happening. Childeric had been in exile, during which time his people were ruled by Aegidius, and after his death by his son and heir Syagrius. Count Paul is recorded in no other source, and is thought to be Syagrius' general. He is leading a force of Romans and Franks. The British had been driven from Bourges by the Goths, and Jordanes tells us Riothamus was routed at Bourges "before the Romans could join him".<sup>34</sup> The force which failed to join him in time must be this Roman and Frankish force under Count Paul. It met with Childeric, who killed Count Paul.

The conflict began with the Saxons and the Goths on one side, the Britons, Romans and Franks on the other. When Childeric kills Count Paul the Franks continue in alliance with the Romans to attack the Saxons. The Franks have not changed sides, they've changed generals. The year 470, the final year of Leo's disastrous restoration, is also the year of Childeric's return from exile.

### **Rome's Champion**

Geoffrey Ashe points up four names in Geoffrey's history which direct our attention to the year 469-70. There is Emperor Leo, who ruled from 457 to 474. There is Pope Sulpicius, a mistake for Simplicius, who held the papacy from 468 to 483. There is Lucius Hiberius, actually the western Emperor Glycerius, mistakenly named Lucerius by Sigebert of Gembloux and misdated by him to 469 - 470. And there is Childeric: Chelric, the name Geoffrey gives to the leader of the Saxons, ally of the treacherous Mordred, is surely meant to recall this Frankish king who was Leo's contemporary and whose name is vaguely associated with treachery and with Saxons.

Actually Chelric is the third Saxon leader in Geoffrey's story whose name recalls the historical king of the Franks. Before him there is Duke Cheldric, who during Arthur's first campaign brought six hundred troop-filled ships to reinforce the invaders. He

<sup>32</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.18, 19, trans. Earnest Brehaut on Internet Medieval Sourcebook, [www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/gregory-hist.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/gregory-hist.html)

<sup>33</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p91

<sup>34</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, XLV

fought at Bath but escaped the slaughter, only to be tracked down and slain by Cadour of Cornwall. And before him there was Cherdic, who along with Octa and Ebissa arrived with troops to reinforce Hengist, in Vortigern's day. This was before the Saxon revolt, but Vortigern's subjects perceived what was coming and protested at pagans being allowed to settle amongst Christians, arguing this was contrary to the faith. The real Childeric was a pagan. His name, and his faith, would have been known to all of Geoffrey's literate contemporaries, for he was the father of Clovis, the *first* Christian king of the Franks and the hero of Gregory of Tours' history.

Before 470 a Roman Emperor had entered into an alliance with a pagan Frankish king against a native Gallo-Roman ruler. Childeric's return with an imperial subsidy must, as Wallace-Hadrill remarks, have detracted from the power and authority of Syagrius. Worse was to come. In 486 Childeric's son Clovis destroyed Syagrius and absorbed his kingdom. Gregory of Tours dates Clovis' baptism to 496. Wallace-Hadrill suggests this may be political dating, designed to "make it appear that Clovis had undertaken all his great campaigns as a Catholic".<sup>35</sup> But whether Clovis embraced Christianity in 496 or 503, there is no getting away from the fact that, at the time of his war with Syagrius, Clovis was a pagan. There is no evidence of any protest from the Roman Church in Gaul. But there is, on record a letter addressed to Clovis from bishop Remigius of Rheims, advising the pagan king that as ruler of Roman *Belgica* he would be wise to maintain a good working relationship with the Roman Church. The Roman Church was clearly intent on maintaining a good working relationship with the pagan king.

All the evidence we have suggests that the replacement of the independent Gallo-Roman kingdom by a Frankish dominion was not an accident of history but an act of Imperial policy, a goal towards which the Empire and its Church had been working for decades. The concluding evidence is in Gregory's story of the celebration of the victory of Vouillé. After the battle Clovis went to Tours to gift the church of St. Martin, the soldier saint who had aided his victory, with some of the spoils of war. And there, in St. Martin's church, he received the clearest tokens of approbation from the Emperor Anastasius, the title of consul and the appropriate insignia. Dressed in the purple tunic and chlamys, with a diadem on his head, Clovis then rode through the streets of Tours scattering gold and silver as he passed.<sup>36</sup>

A seed which Emperor Leo sowed in the year 469-70 bore fruit in the next century. His crusade against the Arian Goths appeared a failure in his own lifetime, but Byzantium's planning was long term. The Frankish dynasty re-established by Leo soon grew strong enough to repay Rome's investment. Two emperors and over thirty years later it had crushed the rebel Syagrius and driven the Goths from Gaul.

In the Enlightenment view of European history, Gaul was lost to the Romans before the end of the fifth century, when the last remaining Roman territory was swallowed up by the expansion of the Franks. *Muir's Historical Atlas* for the year 476 shows an island of pink in northern Gaul, flanked on the east by the Franks, Burgundians and Alamans, and to the south by the Visigoths. In the next map this Roman island has disappeared

<sup>35</sup> J M Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*, p64

<sup>36</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.38

beneath the green of the Franks, now covering most of Gaul right down to the Pyrenees.<sup>37</sup> But a contemporary Byzantine official drawing that same map would have coloured it differently, showing a pink tide spreading over the Gallic territories once held by native rebels and heretic Goths as the victories of Clovis recovered the west for Rome.

Clovis ruled the Franks from 482 to his death in 511. It was in this period that the British succeeded in redeeming their motherland from the invader. The Saxon tide was repulsed. But the Saxons were relatives and allies of the Franks. And the Frank king Clovis was Rome's champion, publicly acknowledged as such by the Byzantine emperor.

King Arthur, Richard Barber reminds us, is invented anew by each age in accordance with its own ideals and values. English historians in the twentieth century envisaged a Roman Arthur, striving against the German invaders who elsewhere brought the Roman west to ruin. Nennius in the ninth imagined a British champion, hammer of the Saxons, at a time when Mercian weakness gave a resurgent Gwynedd new hope of territorial restoration. And Geoffrey in the twelfth, when the Roman Church was subjecting his nation to military and propaganda assault, created an anti-Roman Arthur, champion of independent Britain against an oppressive Roman Empire asserting her unjust claim to a province she had previously abandoned.

It is true to say that each era interprets the past according to the needs of the present. But that does not mean each era invents its history from scratch. There are surviving traditions to contend with, and there are the known facts. Arthur is not an invention. Arthur is the name the Britons themselves gave to the leader of their successful resistance to the Saxons, a struggle which, according to a contemporary witness, all but ended at the siege of Badon. There really was a British resistance, therefore there really was a British leader. And he really was facing a Roman restoration, just across the channel, just as Geoffrey says.

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<sup>37</sup> see below, p91



## Chapter 16

### Alternative Empire

*Inevitably the most important question, the one which has chiefly exercised historians, is the nature of the military crises of these two centuries. Both centuries are politically dark, and the sixth - it might seem - rather more so than the fifth.*

*David Dumville, 1977<sup>38</sup>*

*The term 'Dark Ages' is not the innocent invention of conscientious academics, stumped for the want of a clearer term. It has always been used to impose a viewpoint and to suppress evidence.*

*John Morris, 1973<sup>39</sup>*

#### Dark Age Dates

"The years of Arthur's lifetime are the worst recorded in the history of Britain",<sup>40</sup> John Morris reminds us. This absence of documentation is used to excuse the pejorative name for this era, the Dark Ages. Once this term denounced all the fallen centuries following the glorious rule of the Romans. Now, it just refers to a brief period in British history, between Roman rule and the foundation of England, and its advocates insist it should be retained since this era genuinely is 'dark' from the historian's perspective, due to the absence of documentary evidence. Of course there's no getting away from Badon, and no denying that the British themselves gave the name Arthur to their victorious leader. But what was the significance of the campaign he led, and what came after it, are questions which, for the Dark Age historians, must remain forever in the realms of the unknown. History must be written from the written record, and only one sixth-century insular document survives. Gildas, who does not name Arthur, is our prime, indeed our only historical source for the first half of the sixth century. The genuine political history of the post-Badon period is only what can be extracted from his sermon, and the Dark Age historians haven't managed to extract very much.

Before we examine our sources, David Dumville reminds us, we must have ready the right questions to ask. The obvious question to ask first of Gildas is, when exactly is he writing? We have some clues. Gildas himself tells us he is writing 43 years after Badon - "That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty fourth year since then has already passed"<sup>41</sup> - and ten years after some other event which could have provoked him to write but didn't - "And it was, I confess, with unmeasured grief at heart that I kept silent (the Lord, scanner of consciences, is my witness) as the space

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<sup>38</sup> *Sub-Roman Britain*, p174

<sup>39</sup> *The Age of Arthur*, p507

<sup>40</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p 87

<sup>41</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 26.1

of ten years or more passed by.”<sup>42</sup> But what was that event, and when was Badon?

Bede gives an approximate date for the battle. In his *History of the English Church and People* he tells us Badon was fought about 44 years after the arrival of the Saxon federates, and that that event occurred during the reign of Marcian, who became emperor in 449 and ruled for seven years, which gives us a date for the Saxon advent of between 449 and 456, and for Badon of between 493 and 500. Marcian actually ruled from 450 to 457, so Bede is out by a year. But in any case his dating here is clearly derived from Gildas. Further, he elsewhere dates the Saxon Advent to 447, so we can't assume any definite knowledge on his part. Fortunately we have a Dark Age British source which set out very deliberately to put the record straight.

‘Nennius’ gives a very different date for the Saxon advent, in chapter 66, a section known as the Computus. The sources of ‘Nennius’ are largely known, and the source for the Computus is pretty certainly Victorius of Aquitaine’s *Cursus Paschalis*, or Easter Tables, which in turn were based on the consular list drawn up by his contemporary and countryman, Prosper. The *Cursus Paschalis* correlates a number of Roman date calculations - the consular, the Olympiads, the year since the foundation of Rome - with a Christian Easter calculation beginning with the first Easter, Christ’s resurrection, as Year One. This event Tertullian dated to the consulship of Rubellius and Fufius Geminus, that is, to us, 29 AD. Victorius completed his tables in 457 AD, at which point the consular list stops although the Easter calculations were continued by others. This document was, Robert Vermaat tells us, “made official” by a synod in Gaul in 541,<sup>43</sup> the same year in which the Emperor Justinian officially abolished the consulship.

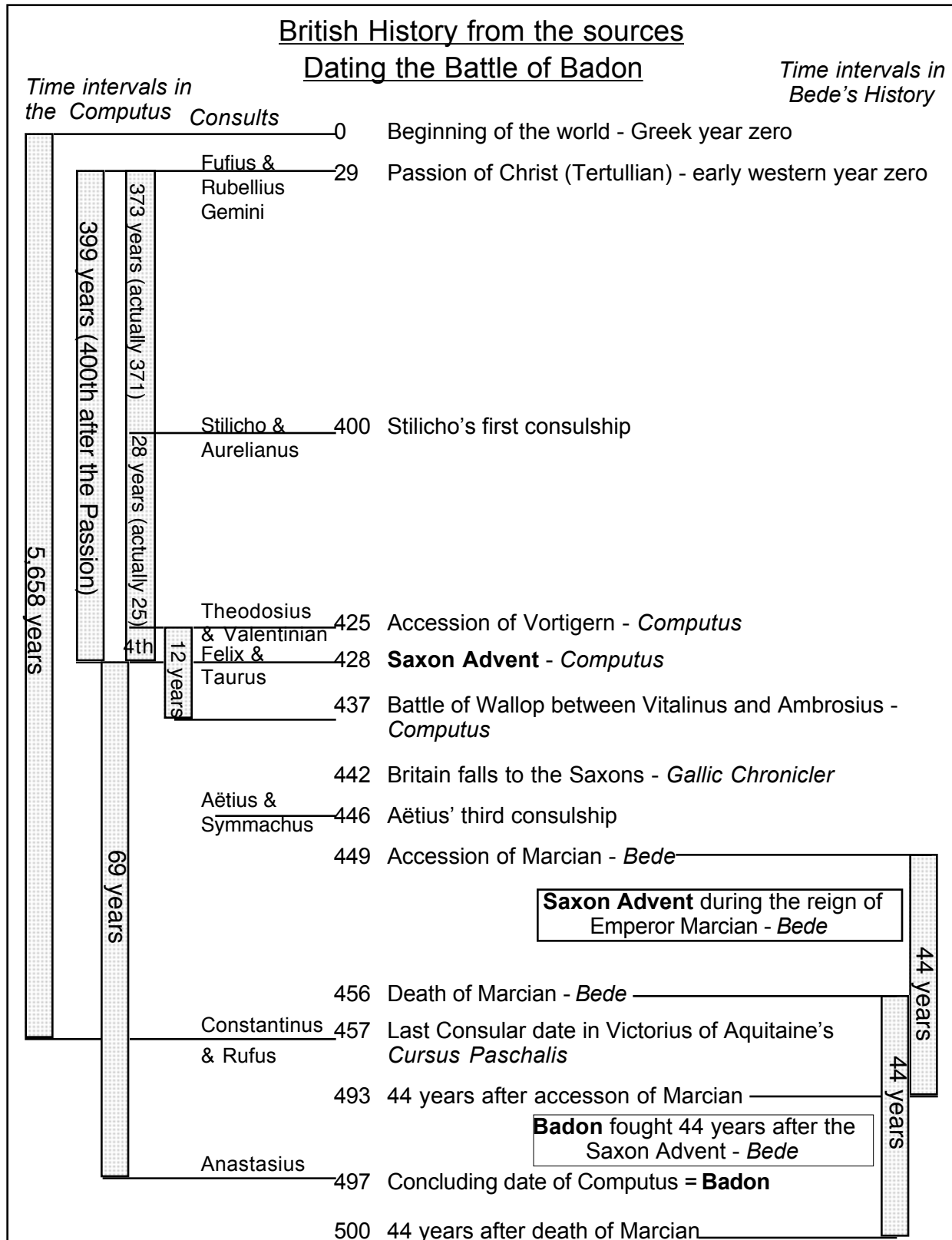
The old Roman system of dating by the annual consuls - there were usually two for each year - was ultimately replaced in the Empire by two different Christian dating systems. The west eventually settled on the Anno Domini system which is still with us, in which the supposed year of Christ’s birth becomes Year One. The Greek east calculated from the beginning of the world, a date based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The first reference in the ‘Nennius’ Computus correlates Victorius’ table with this Greek system. “From the beginning of the world to Constantinus and Rufus are 5,658 years”. Constantinus and Rufus were consuls in 457 AD, the last on Victorius’ list.

The next two calculations contain arithmetical errors: “From the two Gemini, Fufius and Rubellius to Stilicho, 373 years” and “from Stilicho to Valentinian, son of Placidia, and the reign of Vortigern, are 28 years.” The first is out by two years, the second by three. Stilicho’s first consulship was in 400 AD, actually 371 years after the consulship of the Gemini; Valentinian’s first consulship was 25 years after Stilicho’s, in the first year of his reign - emperors always were consuls in their first year. It was in 425 AD that Valentinian III was joint consul with his cousin the eastern emperor Theodosius II, and in that year, according to ‘Nennius’, Vortigern ‘held empire in Britain’. And so we come to the date of the Saxon Advent. ‘Nennius’ tells us the mercenaries were recruited in the fourth year of Vortigern’s reign, during the consulship of Felix and

<sup>42</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 1.2

<sup>43</sup> Robert Vermaat, *Victorius of Aquitaine - Cursus Paschalis annorum DXXXII*

Dating Badon: History of Britain from Continental and Native Sources - 360 to 500				
	<i>Continental sources</i>	<i>Gildas</i>	<i>Bede</i>	<i>Nennius Computus</i>
367	Theodosian rescue			
383-88	EMPEROR MAGNUS MAXIMUS	<b>End of Roman Britain</b>		
395-400	Stilicho's rescue	1st barbarian attack & 1st Roman rescue		
400	<i>1st consulship of Stilicho</i>			
407-11	EMPEROR CONSTANTINE III British victory over barbarians <b>End of Roman Britain</b>	2nd barbarian attack & 2nd Roman rescue		
429	Germanus 1st mission	Romans say goodbye & go home, meaning never to return		425 Accession of Vortigern
431	Palladius bishop of the Irish			428 <b>Saxon Advent</b>
436-7	Germanus 2nd mission			437 Battle of Wallop - Vitalinus v. Ambrosius
441	<b>Saxon revolt</b>			
446	<i>3rd consulship of Aëtius</i>	3rd barbarian attack Letter to Aëtius Devastation & famine		
450-57	EMPEROR MARCIAN	1st British victory Luxury & heresy <b>Saxon Advent</b>	<b>Saxon Advent</b>	
457-74	EMPEROR LEO	Saxons remain quiet for a long time whilst recruiting reinforcements <b>Saxon revolt</b>		
469 -70	Riothamus' expedition to Gaul	Total destruction of British cities, retreat into wilderness or exile Resistance begun by Ambrosius finally culminates in <b>Badon</b>		
474-91	EMPEROR ZENO			
486	Clovis destroys Gallo-Roman kingdom of Syagrius			
491-518	EMPEROR ANASTASIUS			
496	Baptism of Clovis (acc. Gregory of Tours)		44 years after Saxon Advent [493 - 500] = <b>Badon</b>	69 years after Saxon Advent [497] = ?
497	<i>2nd consulship of Anastasius</i>			



Taurus, which on both counts gives 428 AD. Though he also tells us that this was “in the 400th year from the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ”, this is clearly a mistake, quite possibly a copyists error. The word ‘incarnation’ should read ‘passion’, ‘Nennius’ is here counting from the original western Year Zero. The 400th year after the passion of Christ, accepting Tertullian’s date, would again give us 428 AD.

Nennius’ final calculation, on the surface, makes no sense. “From the year when the Saxons came to Britain and were welcomed by Vortigern to Decius and Valerian are 69 years.” The names Decius and Valerian are linked in Christian history; they were borne by two emperors of the mid-third century whose wicked persecution of the Christians brought divine wrath down on their heads.<sup>44</sup> But there is no joint consulship of these two names in the fifth century, or indeed anywhere else, in any extant list. Counting 69 years from consulship of Felix and Taurus, what we come to is second consulship of Emperor Anastasius, which in 497 he held alone.

Robert Vermaat suggests a solution: “Though no Decius and Valerian occur together anywhere, there is a Valerian (or Valerius) in AD 521 (A P 494). This may be the explanation for this error,” but then admits “why this year would have been important to 'Nennius' is not clear.”<sup>45</sup> It becomes clear if we **simply dismiss these two names as a later addition and a deliberate red herring**, and treat the entire Computus as a correction of Bede, of which this is the conclusion. Bede tells us the Saxons came to Britain at the invitation of King Vortigern in the time of Marcian, and that Badon was fought about 44 years after their arrival. ‘Nennius’, elaborately, dates Vortigern’s accession to 425 AD, the Saxon advent to 428 AD and then 69 years after that ... what? I suggest this is originally the date ‘Nennius’ gave to Badon.

In confirmation, Badon occurs in year 72 in the *Welsh Annals*. It is a later calculation which equates ‘year 72’ with 516 AD. This would make the Annals ‘year zero’ 444 AD, a date with no obvious significance in Welsh history. Seventy two years before 497 AD, on the other hand, is 425 AD - the year of Vortigern’s accession.

Our solitary sixth-century source can now be dated precisely. *The Ruin of Britain* was written in the 44th year after Badon, in 540 AD. Then we can deduce what event, just over ten years previously, almost provoked Gildas into writing an earlier denunciation of his countrymen. In 529 AD the Council of Orange condemned Pelagius and the semi-Pelagians of Gaul. The Pelagians had always protested that their condemnation by Imperial decree, and without a hearing, was invalid. Pope Zosimus had agreed with them. They struggled for years to have their case reopened, and heard properly, in the time-honoured Christian tradition, in a synod. Finally, a century late, the Council of Orange had validated Pelagius’ hereticisation. Yet Gildas’ Pelagian contemporaries still clung to the error and maintained their wicked separation from the Church of the Empire. At the time he then held his peace, but he can do so no longer.

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<sup>44</sup> They were uniquely disgraced: Decius was the first Roman Emperor to be killed by the enemy on the field of battle, and Valerian was the first to be taken captive by the enemy (the Goths and the Persians respectively). The Christian rhetorician Lactantius puts them fourth and fifth in his list of wicked persecutors who suffered God’s vengeance, see [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.v.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.v.html).

<sup>45</sup> Robert Vermaat, *Victorius of Aquitaine - Cursus Paschalis annorum DXXXII*

Obviously, despite his claims and his calling on God as his witness, it was not the synod over a decade previously which provoked Gildas into writing his sermon in 540. And neither was it the violence of the British tyrants.

### **Gildas' Crusade**

Gildas Sapiens, Gildas the Wise, is how this writer was remembered throughout the medieval period. And the views of Bede, of Wulfstan and of William of Newburgh are still endorsed by the Dark Age historians today: Gildas correctly diagnosed the ills of his society and warned of their inevitable consequence. His medieval biography, however, they do not endorse. The medieval *Lives* of Gildas have him travelling widely, from north Britain, to Wales and the west country, to Ireland, indeed the earliest takes him as far as Rome and Ravenna, then finally to Brittany, where he founds a monastery before he turns thirty years of age. Dark Age orthodoxy requires a more parochial Gildas, for if his sermon is to be taken as proof of Britain's descent into a Dark Age, in which "knowledge of the outside world and knowledge of the past had been wiped out of men's minds",<sup>46</sup> then he can't be allowed to have travelled far, or he might have learned something, and then what excuse could there be for his history?

There is no honest error in Gildas' historical introduction. His fabrication clearly serves a purpose and that purpose is not benign. Gildas himself has not sought to disguise his intention. The Dark Age historians are self-deluded. Their picture of Gildas the patriot, wringing his hands over the folly of his feuding countrymen, is just as much a figment of the historical imagination as the Roman Arthur, last bearer of the flame of civilization. Gildas doesn't testify to a sub-Roman British collapse. He testifies to a Britain which is ruled, ordered, a Britain which has kings, judges, priests, a Britain which is divided into two factions but which at the time of his writing is largely at peace. It is a peace which Gildas has set himself to disturb.

Gildas does not condemn the entire ruling class of Britain. He condemns, among the lay rulers, five specific individuals whom he addresses by name: Maelgwn of Gwynedd, his cousin Cuneglasus, Aurelius Caninus, Vortipor of Demetia and Constantine, ex-ruler Dumnonia. Their territories are all reckoned to be located in the south west of Britain. There are British rulers Gildas does approve of, whom he terms *duces*, 'commanders', in contrast to the Pelagian *tyrannos*. Gildas does not name or locate these *duces*, but historians deduce their territories lie to the north and east of the five tyrants. It has been suggested that Gildas could not have penned his virulent denunciation of these five from within their territories, and must have lived in some other part of Britain. E A Thompson favours a northern location. More recent scholarship prefers the territory of the Durotriges, to the east of Dumnonia. The earliest *Life of Gildas* claims he wrote *The Ruin of Britain* in the monastery that he founded in a place that still bears his name, St. Gildas de Rhuys in southern Brittany. But wherever he is operating from, Gildas is not working alone. He tells us he is "spurred on by my own thoughts and the devout prayers of my brethren", the few remaining "true sons" of the "holy mother church", who "by their holy prayers support

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<sup>46</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p115

my weakness from total collapse”.<sup>47</sup> And he addresses himself to others of that faction; good Roman clerics who are not “stained with the disgrace of schism, pride and uncleanness”<sup>48</sup> and who clearly are in a position to get themselves martyred, since one of the criticisms he levels against them is that they have failed to do so. So there is a potential Roman fifth column inside the territory of the Pelagian tyrants which Gildas’ ‘sermon’ is intended to activate.

Dark Age historians have not deduced much history from Gildas’ address to the good priests. It is couched as a series of biblical examples, and has surely been overlooked for that reason. But it is this section which makes the purpose of the work explicit. It opens and closes with the negative example of Eli, who suffered the same fate as his wicked sons because he did not sufficiently reprove them for their sins - the lesson being that the good priests risk sharing the fate of the Pelagians, and what that fate is Gildas does not leave us to doubt. The wicked tyrants, the lay protectors of the Pelagian British Church, are to be overthrown and the good priests should dedicate themselves to this end, whatever the risk, whatever the cost. They should, like Samuel, depose bad kings and replace them with good. Like Melchizedek, they should withhold their blessings until the victors have defeated the dire armies of five kings. They should imitate the example of Elisha, who “by fervent prayer to God opened the eyes of a boy sweating in despair of his life and suddenly terrified at the warlike preparations of the enemy besieging the city they were in, so that he could see the mountain full of allies from the heavenly army, armed chariots and horsemen flashing with fiery countenances, and believe that he was stronger to save than his enemies to fight”.<sup>49</sup>

Gildas’ faction is a tiny minority, as he tells us himself: “so small a number that, as they lie in her lap, the holy mother church in a sense does not see them”.<sup>50</sup> Yet they are going to win the war. The *duces* who have found the narrow path have previously punished the tyrants and they will do so again. If the prospects don’t look encouraging it is up to the good priests to reassure their flock, as they exhort them on to victory, that the “allies from the heavenly army” are about to rescue the righteous from an apparently overwhelming enemy.

It is hardly to be imagined that Gildas the Wise, contriver of a completely false, propaganda history, was naive enough to expect divine assistance would assure the Holy Roman minority of victory in an all-out war against the British Pelagians. He was anticipating more earthy reinforcements.

### **Justinian’s Reconquest**

We cannot expect to understand any text outside the context in which it is written, and the context within which Gildas is judged is a figment of the Enlightenment imagination. Dark Age Britain is pictured as a world apart, Gildas as a man of this dark era, knowing nothing beyond his own small world. But the archaeological evidence

<sup>47</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 1.16, 26.4

<sup>48</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69.1

<sup>49</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 72.2

<sup>50</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 26.3

proves extensive trade between Britain and the eastern Roman Empire, and the plague which struck Constantinople in 542 reached the British Isles scarcely a year later. It plainly did not reach these parts by first traversing the continent of Europe: it arrived by ship.

Gildas is not inhabiting some lost world of faerie, located outside normal time and space. He is a man of his age, and that age is the age of Justinian, the ultimate *Restitutor Orbis*.

Justinian's reign officially dates from 527, though it is accepted he was already effectively ruler of the Empire during the last years of his uncle, Emperor Justin. He inherited a Roman dominion which had, in modern perspective, shrunk to just its eastern half, but the eastern emperors still saw themselves as rightful rulers of the west. The barbarian kings who held power there did so only as Roman appointees, or as usurpers whose rule should ideally be overthrown. Justinian began his restoration of Roman rule with an attack on Vandal Africa.

The story of Justinian's wars is told by Procopius, private secretary to general Belisarius, whom he accompanied on his campaigns to Africa, Italy and Persia. Which is to say Procopius was not only of the right time, he was in the right place. So for this period in history, at least as far as the Roman Empire is concerned, we have the perfect historical source, not just a primary source but an eye-witness account of the events described.

It was Belisarius who led the first campaign of Justinian's restoration. The invasion force sailed from Constantinople in 533 AD, around the time of the summer solstice. Justinian had already taken the precaution of eliciting the support of the Ostrogothic rulers of Italy for the invasion, so Belisarius was able to land in Sicily, which island the Vandal king had unwisely ceded to the Ostrogoths in return for an annual subsidy. And it was in Sicily that Belisarius learnt - from the servant of a friend of Procopius - that the Vandal fleet was then engaged in suppressing a revolt in Sardinia. The Vandal king, Gelimer, actually had a choice of two revolts to deal with, both of them encouraged, supported and financed by Justinian. With no Vandal fleet to oppose him, Belisarius landed his army on African soil and within a week had taken control of Gelimer's capital, Carthage. The Vandal state, which had controlled North Africa for ninety five years, collapsed in a matter of months, under the combined pressure of Belisarius' generalship and Justinian's cunning diplomacy. Though it was to be another fifteen years before the Berber tribes of the interior were finally 'pacified', by April 534 a Roman administration was once again established in North Africa, Gelimer was a pensioner of Justinian and 2,000 Vandals were conscripted into the Imperial army.

This easy victory over the Vandals encouraged further attacks on the west which ultimately bankrupted the eastern Empire, forced to fight on two fronts when the "Endless Peace" with Persia, which Justinian bought at a cost of 11,000 gold pounds, broke down after only eight years. In 540 Shah Khusro sacked Antioch, in the same year that Gildas penned his warning to the British Tyrants, and Ravenna, capital of the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy, fell to the Romans.

The Roman reconquest of Italy, begun in 535, initially appeared an easier prospect



than that of Vandal Africa, but the Goths recovered from the initial shock of Justinian's attack and fought back doggedly. In the eighteen years of war which followed the civilized kingdom which Theodoric the Great had established, with its dual legal system allowing Romans and Goths to live together in peace, was obliterated. Plundering armies from both sides shattered the Italian economy. The city of Rome itself changed hands repeatedly, and endured three sieges. The final battle between the two forces took place in October of 553 and lasted, according to Procopius, for two whole days: "they kept at it with the fury of wild beasts by reason of their bitter hatred of each other."<sup>51</sup> The Empire's victory left Italy a war-torn ruin, and reduced her ancient capital city to little more than a village.

But if the restoration of Roman rule was not necessarily a Good Thing, it was very real. Indeed it was the major feature of political life in the period. By the time of Justinian's death in 565 AD the Roman forces had recovered Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, the Balearic Islands, the coast of the Balkans, North Africa and the southern coast of Spain, including the Pillars of Hercules. The Mediterranean was once again a Roman lake. Inland, Rome's allies the Catholic kings of the Franks had expanded their power over the whole of Gaul, conquering and absorbing both Arian German kingdoms and independent Gallic regions and confining the once-mighty Visigoths to Spain and Septimania. The crusade against the Arian Goths, which appeared such a dismal failure in the time of Leo, was by the end of the sixth century brought to a satisfactory conclusion, largely through the efforts of Justinian. In 589 AD the Spanish king Recared, weakened by Imperial attacks from without and the fifth-column activities of Roman churchmen from within his kingdom, was forced to abandon the Arian faith of his ancestors and submit to Rome.

Which leaves only one lost western province unaccounted for: Britain.

Britain was a distant and half-mythical island to Caesar's contemporaries and, it would seem, to Justinian's. Procopius was so confused about its geography he apparently thought it was two islands, one called Britannia and one Brittia.<sup>52</sup> But ignorant and parochial though he was, still Procopius is not only a contemporary source, he is an eye-witness, living in close proximity to the eastern Empire's most powerful men. What he reports is what he directly observed, on campaign with his master Belisarius and in the corridors of power in Constantinople. With regard to Britain, what he reports is this:

- Britain was never recovered after the overthrow of Constantine III but continued to be ruled by 'tyrants'.<sup>53</sup> Tyrants are illegitimate rulers, rulers not appointed by Rome. Thus Procopius testifies that at a time when Rome was engaged in the reconquest of lost provinces she still regarded Britain as one such.
- Justinian - whom Procopius cordially hated - drained the treasury by lavishing money on barbarians, so that they came to him from all quarters to receive his

<sup>51</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VIII, 35.32

<sup>52</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VIII.20.1-5

<sup>53</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, III.2.38

lavish presents: “as far as Britain, and over all the inhabited earth; so that nations whose very names we had never heard of, we now learned to know, seeing their ambassadors for the first time.”<sup>54</sup> Britain may have been a dim and distant region to Procopius, but Justinian’s gold, used to further Roman objectives in areas not directly controlled by him, was put to use here also.

- Visitors from the island of Britain were present in one of the embassies attending Justinian’s court, and for a very definite purpose: “The island of Brittia is inhabited by three very numerous nations, each having one king over it. And the names of these nations are the Angili, the Frisones and the Brittones, the last being named from the island itself. And so great appears to be the population of these nations that every year they emigrate thence in large companies with their women and children and go to the land of the Franks. And the Franks allow them to settle in the part of their land which appears to be more deserted, and by this means they say that they are winning over the island. Thus it actually happened that not long ago the king of the Franks, in sending some of his intimates on an embassy to the Emperor Justinian in Byzantium, sent with them some of the Angili, thus seeking to establish his claim that the island was ruled by him.”<sup>55</sup> So, while Justinian’s gold was working away in Britain, a Frank king sent a delegation to the Emperor which included Angles from the island of Britain, in order to ‘establish his claim’.

If the island was a lost Roman province, now ruled by tyrants, who would the rightful ruler be, if Justinian endorsed the Frank king’s claim? Who would a loyal son of the Church, such as Gildas, regard as the legitimate ruler of Britain? Gildas, who in his address to the wicked priests states “One of us is right to say: **we greatly desire that the enemies of the church be our enemies also, with no kind of alliance, and that her friends and protectors be not only our allies but our fathers and masters too**.”<sup>56</sup>

Gildas was one of a group of religious - he tells us himself that “by their holy prayers they support my weakness from total collapse”<sup>57</sup> Later saints’ *Lives* claim Gildas was educated by St. Illtud, along with St. Samson and St. Paul Aurelian,<sup>58</sup> and that these three later crossed into Brittany, where Paul and Samson had friendly dealings with the Frank kings. The *Life of Paul Aurelian* says that Paul’s patron Victor was “a pious Christian who ruled by authority of the Lord emperor Philibert”<sup>59</sup>, that is, Childebert of Paris, who ruled from 511 to 558.<sup>60</sup> The *Life of Samson* relates that saint’s adventures at the court of ‘King Hiltbert’, believed to be the same Childebert.

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<sup>54</sup> Procopius, *Secret History*, 19

<sup>55</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VIII.20.6-10

<sup>56</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 92.3

<sup>57</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 26.4

<sup>58</sup> see John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 3, p73.

<sup>59</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p253

<sup>60</sup> Childebert was one of the four sons of Clovis who, as was the custom among the Merovingians, divided their father’s kingdom between them on his death, each becoming king of a portion of it.

But Dark Age historians do not like to take later saints' *Lives* into account when writing the political history of this dark era, so let's return to Procopius.

In the spring of 537 AD the Ostrogoths laid siege to Belisarius in the city of Rome. The siege lasted a year and nine days, and towards the end of it the Goths, having failed to prevent the revictualling of the city, offered a peace conference. Procopius reports the negotiations as if he was present, as he may well have been. He says that the Goths offered to cede Sicily, and Belisarius offered Britain in exchange. I'll say that again: in 538 AD, according to a contemporary authority, the Romans offered to give Britain to the Ostrogoths. The decision was clearly Justinian's, for when the Goths tried to include Campania and Naples in the deal Belisarius refused to discuss the proposal on the grounds that he had no authority to do so. Then clearly he did have authority to cede "the whole island of Britain, which belongs to us from of old and is far larger than Sicily."<sup>61</sup> These are the words Procopius puts into Belisarius' mouth, and they may have been the very words he spoke. The island of Britain belonged to Rome of old and was still hers to dispose of. Just two years before Gildas wrote *The Ruin of Britain*, in which he traces the origins of all his country's woes to her wicked, heretical rebellion against the Holy Romans, a Roman Emperor publicly proclaimed that he had a perfect right to turn the long-lost province of Britannia over to German rule.

Gildas, writing in 540, is expecting something other than a heavenly host to reinforce his faction in the war against the Pelagians, a war to be waged initially by a group so small that the holy mother doesn't even see her remaining sons; a group which, he warns, will also be swept away if it does not prosecute this conflict with sufficient zeal. He is writing at a time when a contemporary witness testifies that Justinian claimed Britain was rightfully part of the Empire, that it was in his power to select who should rule it. He is writing during the reign of the Frank king Theudebert, whom Justinian paid to attack the Ostrogoths in Italy. He is writing within two years of Belisarius' proposal to the Ostrogoths that they should cede Sicily in exchange for Britain. Britain was within Justinian's sights but not within his grasp. Operating this far north he would need to use proxies. What Gildas is surely expecting is a Frankish force crossing the channel or a fleet of displaced Arians arriving from the Mediterranean, or possibly both.

It never materialised. In the 540s the tide of history turned against the *Restitutor Orbis*. A deadly plague hit the Empire, killing around a quarter of its inhabitants, with disastrous effects on its tax revenues. The war in Italy dragged on throughout that decade and beyond, the Frank king proved an unreliable ally and the collapse of the Endless Peace with the Persians forced Justinian to divert resources to the defence of his eastern frontiers. But at the very start of the decade, when he wrote *The Ruin of Britain*, Gildas could not have foreseen this, and nor could any of his addressees.

To the Dark Age historians, the sixth century is an obscure period of British history. Lacking the contemporary sources from which alone a history can be written they are forced to conclude that what happened in this transitional period, when Independent Britain finally disintegrated and the ground was laid for the foundation of England, is

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<sup>61</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VI, 6.27-32

simply unknowable. Yet they are quite sure they know who is to blame. The same sub-Roman Britons who failed to leave us a written record also failed to create a viable state. Deprived of the light of Roman civilization, incapable of maintaining the fruits of progress and discipline, the ruling class of Britain dissolved into warring factions and so allowed the Saxons to take over their land.

Dark Age historians may convince themselves this is a conclusion arrived at from a study of the allowable evidence, but actually it is merely a variant of Bede's propaganda history of the foundation of England. After the God-given Roman victory of Badon, Bede tells us, the wicked Britons abandoned truth and justice to the point their very existence was forgotten and gave themselves up to unspeakable crimes. So God abandoned them, and chose a new race to inhabit their beautiful island. A hundred years later Pope Gregory, motivated by nothing more than a concern for Saxon souls, sent Bishop Augustine to Kent.

**Geoffrey tells** an entirely different story. Badon was Arthur's victory, Rome had nothing to do with it. It was only after Arthur had defeated the Saxons and established his dominion over the whole of northern Europe that Rome reappeared on the scene. Her challenge to Arthur's rule led ultimately to Camlann, but Independent Britain did not collapse at this point. **It was the rule of the treacherous and worthless Keredic which opened Britain to her enemies. The Saxons were the ultimate beneficiaries, but it was not God who gave them the land. Britain fell to the combined forces of the Franks under Isembard, nephew of King Louis, and an African fleet under Gormund.**

Geoffrey invented nothing, so where did he get this from? Irish tradition recalled an African invasion of Ireland, long before the Roman period. But the name Gormund is Germanic, and Geoffrey sets his story in the sixth century, when North Africa actually was inhabited by a Germanic people who maintained a powerful fleet.

**Of course Geoffrey's story is fantastic, as is Bede's. But Geoffrey's is a fantasy of an entirely different order. In *The History of the Kings of Britain* there is no intention to deceive. Geoffrey openly demonstrates how his narrative is constructed. He constantly invites the reader to refer to his sources. His entertaining story is not designed to disguise the truth, but rather, to illuminate it. No historian now suggests that sixth-century Britain actually was invaded by a Frankish force from the Continent or a Germanic fleet from the Mediterranean, but the surviving record clearly reveals that this is exactly what Justinian and his allies were laying plans for in 540 AD, when Gildas wrote his sermon.**

### **The British Collapse Revisited**

There is a sub-branch of history, recently returning to respectability, which sets out to examine the history that didn't happen, to weigh the significance of particular events by asking the question "what if...?". Counterfactual History, as it is called, has not, historically, met with universal favour among historians. But clearly it has its uses. Imagination can illuminate the historical facts, where determinism may blind us to them. For history must be written from the surviving written record, but in order to understand that record we must understand the motives of its writers, and those

writers did not, on the whole, possess perfect foresight. The past that, in the event, actually happened might be very far from the future they envisaged when they wrote, and historians who do not take this into account could completely misinterpret their witness. In the case of a seminal, or worse, a solitary surviving text, the resulting distortion is potentially huge.

King Robert of England never happened. *The History of the Kings of Britain*, the legal case created to support Robert of Gloucester's candidature, with its carefully crafted historical proofs, was never put to its intended use. In consequence the wealth of insight it offers into post-Roman British history has never been accessed by Dark Age historians who even now dismiss its author as a fraudulent historian, or more kindly, but no more accurately, as a writer of romantic fiction. Geoffrey of Monmouth should rather be regarded as the father of historical criticism, and one of the most brilliant propagandists who ever lived.

Justinian's invasion of Britain never happened. *The Ruin of Britain*, the only surviving British document from this era, is regarded as a sermon authored by a devout Christian monk, a Dark Age Jeremiah motivated by his deep concern for the moral well-being of his nation. More accurately, Gildas is a Late Roman Lord Haw Haw.

*The Ruin of Britain*, like every other historical source, can only be understood within its historical context, and that context is Justinian's Roman restoration, the sixth-century recovery of the western provinces of the Empire from the illegitimate rule of barbarians and heretics. We know something of this emperor's methods. Justinian's military invasions were preceded by intense diplomatic manoeuvres, both overt and covert. Revolts were encouraged in the targeted states, Roman Christians reminded where their loyalties should lie, rulers denounced and threatened (mere threat could be surprisingly effective, see below). **Gildas' threats to the five tyrants and exhortations to the good priests are perfectly in accord with the known activities of Justinian's agents on the eve of an attack.** Gildas is not warning against the dangers of civil war, he is preaching a crusade, and as he himself tells us, he is not acting alone.

In the sixth century Independent Britain, **the only ex-Roman province to have successfully resisted the encroaching barbarians, disintegrated through internal violence. This appears to be the universally accepted view.** When Gildas wrote, that is, in 540 AD, the British still ruled Britain, but by 597, when Pope Gregory sent his emissary to the court of King Aethelbert of Kent, the English had established their dominion over the best part of the island. **But how, exactly, did this come about?**

Apart from Gildas, our sources for this dark, obscure, transitional period of British history are, of course, late, unreliable and doubtless contaminated with legend. But they are not all disreputably British. It is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which provides the detail, the names and dates, for the first major British reversal of the sixth century. In 552 AD Cynric, King of the West Saxons, conquered Salisbury from the British. In 577 his son and successor Ceawlin further enlarged the boundaries of the kingdom by conquering the British cities of Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath.

The Chronicle is a ninth-century work written in Wessex, with a clear Wessex bias.

But the highly reputable Bede, writing in Northumbria 731, gives some credence to the West Saxons' claim to have been at the forefront of the post-Badon English assault on the British. Ceawlin, King of the West Saxons is the second in his list of English kings who 'held empire' south of the Humber. According to the Chronicle, the founder of this dynasty was Cerdic, who with his son Cynric came to Britain in 495 AD, with five ships, and fought with the Welsh that same day in a place called Cerdic's-ore. The genealogy of every king of Wessex is traced by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle back to this Dark Age founder, and hence the dynasty is known as the Cerdingas. But **Cerdic is a British name.**

It is an accepted fact that the legendary founder of the Wessex royal line, the purported ancestor of every English monarch from Athelstan to Edward the Confessor, and from Henry Plantagenet to Elizabeth II, bears a British name. Cerdic is identical with Caradoc, Keredic, Caractacus. It is the name borne by the British king who resisted the Claudian invasion and was taken captive to Rome around 50 AD. Cynric and Ceawlin are equally dubious, particularly as these names are found paired in a context that is clearly not Saxon. Cynric is the Welsh Cynyr, or Cunorix, and a stone inscription found in Wroxeter, dated to 460 - 475, commemorates a Cunorix son of Coline, who is suspected of being Irish.<sup>62</sup> Cerdic's immediate forbears include the clearly invented Gewis, and beyond that they are not, apparently, his ancestors at all, they are lifted from the traditions of other Saxon royal lines.<sup>63</sup> Whoever compiled the story of the origins of Wessex was clearly faced with a Cerdic who was too entrenched with tradition to be got rid of, but as John Morris says: "A ruler with a British name, with no ancient tradition of English forebears or English descendants, is plainly British."<sup>64</sup>

We could deduce that there is something dodgy about the Cerdingas from our most reputable of English sources. Bede, who prefers to omit the entire sixth century from his history of England from the Roman conquest to his own time, is also strangely reticent about the West Saxons. He includes Ceawlin in his list of English kings who gained *imperium*, but gives us no clue how he achieved that, and tells us nothing at all about his ancestors or descendants. Later West Saxon kings are brought into his story; Cuichelm who sent an assassin to murder King Edwin, Cynegils, first of his line to accept the Faith of Christ, young Caedwalla who gifted St. Wilfrid with Isle of Wight and went off to Rome to die, but no attempt is made to link these with Ceawlin, genetically or politically. There is no mention of Cerdic, founder of dynasty; the only Cerdic in Bede's history is a British king who murdered the father of an English saint.<sup>65</sup> Of course Bede does not have to include such information. He is not writing a modern history, he is making a case, arranging a selection of the known facts to demonstrate that the wicked Britons were defeated by God's will so that the new Chosen People could inherit the land. The story of the foundation of Wessex clearly had nothing to contribute to his argument. But then it wouldn't have, if Cerdic was a Briton.

**So, are the victories of Cynric and Ceawlin really the first stage in the post-Badon**

<sup>62</sup> See August Hunt, *Cunedda as Vortigern*, 2001 on [www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/artgue/guestdan3.htm](http://www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/artgue/guestdan3.htm)

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, [www.1911encyclopedia.org/Wessex](http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Wessex)

<sup>64</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p104

<sup>65</sup> St. Hilda - see Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, IV.23

English conquest of Britain, or just incidents in the sixth-century British civil war? If the latter, then we can't really say that civil war cost the Britons their land, since for one British dynasty at least, it led to territorial expansion and a sixth-century *imperium*, and eventually to the rulership of the whole British Isles.

The collapse of the north would appear to conform more closely to the traditional pattern. Bede tells us how Aethelferth of Bernicia overran the British kingdoms like a latter-day Saul, slaughtering or enslaving the inhabitants and making their land tributary to the English or ready for English settlement. British tradition remembers civil war and political assassination among the northern rulers prior to this invasion. But here also there are details preserved in the record which suggest that the sixth-century collapse cannot be blamed entirely on the inborn stupidity of the natives.

Lacking the evidence a historian would choose to have, we are obliged to turn to what has actually survived. In the twelfth century the Anglo-Norman bishop of Glasgow commissioned a Cistercian monk to write a hagiography of his city's patron saint. Jocelin of Furness tells us he wrote up his *Life of Kentigern* from two earlier written accounts, seasoning with Roman salt the barbarity of these originals. Jocelin's *Life* claims that Kentigern was made bishop of Cambria by the king and clergy of that country at a time when this kingdom stretched from sea to sea like the wall built by Severus. But when a wicked tyrant, Morken, gained the throne Kentigern was physically attacked and fled in fear of his life. In exile the saint continued his holy work, becoming a bishop in a foreign land. He visited Rome seven times in order to correct the deficiencies of his learning and consecration, for he was aware that the Church in Britain had fallen into error through the assaults of heathens and heretics. One such heretic fetched up on his own doorstep, an eloquent pilgrim who claimed to be a preacher of the truth, intent on the salvation of souls. But Kentigern, questioning the man, discovered him to be a Pelagian, and when the sinner obstinately refused to renounce that ruinous sect, the saint expelled him from his diocese and cursed him to death. The Pelagian drowned while crossing a river. Meanwhile, the saint's own countrymen were suffering terribly on account of the wrong done to him. But God in his mercy raised up a new king, a most Christian man named Rederech, and he perceived that the remedy for his country's woes was to restore Kentigern to his rightful place. Instructed by a divine vision, the saint consented to vacate his current bishopric and return to his original see. After a prosperous rule, filled with signs and miracles, the saint eventually died at a great old age and was buried in his church in Glasgow.

The 'barbarous originals' from which Jocelin compiled his hagiography have not survived, but we must allow that he did have such sources since his story includes the names, elsewhere recorded, of genuinely sixth-century characters and we can hardly credit that an Anglo-Norman monk went trawling through British and Irish histories and genealogies to come up with names of the right era. 'Nennius' names Rhydderch and Morcant among the kings who fought with the mighty Urien of Reged against the pagan Bernicians, and accuses Morcant of being behind the assassination of Urien.

In the genealogies of the northern kings Urien and Morcant are distantly related, both being descendants of Coel Hen, ie Old King Cole. Riderch son of Tutagual is listed in the genealogy of the kings of Strathclyde, and King Roderic son of Tothal is made a contemporary of Columba in Adomnan's seventh-century *Life* of that saint.

There is independent evidence for a sixth-century bishop Kentigern, not actually in Rome, but in the Roman Church. The bishop of Senlis, near Paris, is recorded as Gonotiernus at the council of Orléans in 549 and as Gonothigernus at the council of Paris held somewhere between 552 and 573.<sup>66</sup> This is the same name. The -tigern element is also found in Vortigern, and in a number of other British and Irish names of this era. The name indicates that this Gallic bishop originated either in the British Isles or in Brittany. Of course there could have been two Kentigerns living in exactly the same time period, but the name is otherwise unknown. The see of Senlis was within the Merovingian kingdom of Paris, which after the death of Clovis was ruled by his son Childebert. Also listed among the bishops attending this Paris council is one Samson, whose see is not given but who is believed to be Samson of Dol in Brittany, whose seventh-century *Life* associates him with King Childebert.

If this bishop of Senlis is indeed Kentigern of Glasgow, then a northern British king recruited a Roman cleric from the Merovingian territory to preside over the church in his kingdom. Such a move would have political implications. And as Nikolai Tolstoy points out, there may be some significance in the fact that a poem in *The Black Book of Carmarthen* calls this northern king *ritech hael ruyfadur fit* 'Rhydderch the Generous, defender of the faith'.<sup>67</sup>

Riderch was another of those sixth-century British kings who appears to have done well out of civil war. This story is analysed in Tolstoy's *The Quest for Merlin*. The original of the Arthurian magician, Tolstoy argues, was a sixth-century druid Myrddin, bard to the pagan prince Gwenddolau of the Selgovae, a northern British tribe who were never Romanised. Gwenddolau was attacked and killed by his cousins Peredur and Gwrgi of York in the battle of Arderydd, famed for its savagery. The *Welsh Annals* date the battle to 573, and record that 'Merlin went mad'. Poetry in *The Black Book of Carmarthen* depicts him hiding in the forest of Celyddon from the men of Riderch, who are hunting him down in order to kill him. No record recounts the causes of the battle of Arderydd, and there is no early claim that Riderch took part in it. But it would seem he was the real beneficiary of this fratricidal war.

The site of this battle was discovered in the nineteenth century by W F Skene, who found it was still remembered in the oral tradition of the locality - as a battle between the Picts and the Romans:

...the tradition of the country was that a great battle was fought here between the Romans and the Picts who held the camp, in which the Romans were victorious; that the camp was defended by three hundred men, who

<sup>66</sup> The date is often given as 557. More certainly, an earlier and a later council of Paris was held in 552 and 573 respectively, see *Gallic Councils 511–680* on Gallia et Frankia, An Online Encyclopedia of Late Antique Gaul, <http://spectrum.troy.edu/~ajones/concilia.htm>

<sup>67</sup> Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Quest for Merlin*, p46



surrendered it, and were all put to the sword and buried in the orchard of the Upper Moat, at a place which he [the local farmer] showed me.<sup>68</sup>

The traditional view among historians is that the British polity collapsed into civil war due to the absence of Rome's guiding hand. The totality of the evidence, including the contemporary evidence of Gildas and Procopius, suggests rather that it was Rome's presence in Britain which precipitated these conflicts. Civil war was a weapon in Justinian's armoury, part of the softening-up process which preceded his Roman recoveries. Of course by the time of Ardeydd Justinian had been dead some eight years. But his gold would still have been working away, in those areas where he had invested.

### **Maelgwn's Bards**

To understand Gildas we have to understand Justinian, and the way in which he conducted his Roman restoration. The onset of the Gothic war is particularly illustrative.

Justinian's excuse for this assault on the Italian Goths, who had materially assisted the Roman attack on the Vandals, was a violent dispute within the Gothic royal family. Until 534 Queen Amalasantha, daughter of Theodoric the Great, ruled the Gothic kingdom as regent for her son Athalaric. The boy's unfortunate demise in that year brought her cousin Theodahad to the throne and doomed her cause; deprived of power, she was assassinated. Justinian affected outrage: dismissing Theodahad's claims of innocence he declared that war was now inevitable. But Procopius admits he had already entered into secret negotiations separately with each of the royal cousins, offering an honourable and wealthy exile in Byzantium in return for their surrender of the territories they each controlled. War was indeed inevitable, because Justinian's plan for a bloodless conquest of Italy was thwarted by Theodahad's accession.

The Gothic war began in the summer of 535. The Roman forces were set on Italy from two directions. On land Mundus, the *magister militum* of Illyria in the Balkans, was ordered to "make trial" of Salona, the capital of Gothic Dalmatia, which he soon captured. Belisarius was to approach by sea, landing his forces in Sicily. But Justinian instructed him to disguise his intention, pretending his destination was North Africa, and to land on Sicily under some pretext. Once there he was to assess if the island could be easily taken (with a force considerably smaller than that which he had commanded against the Vandals). If he believed it could not, he was to sail on to Africa as if he had never had any other goal in mind. Belisarius took Sicily by December 31st, 535 AD. Meanwhile Justinian sent the Frankish king Theudebert a present of gold, and the promise of more to come, along with a letter which Procopius quotes:

The Goths, having seized by violence Italy, which was ours, have not only

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<sup>68</sup> Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Quest for Merlin*, p52

refused absolutely to give it back, but have committed further acts of injustice against us which are unendurable and pass beyond all bounds. For this reason we have been compelled to take the field against them, and it is proper that you should join with us in waging this war, which is rendered yours as well as ours not only by the orthodox faith, which rejects the opinion of the Arians, but also by the enmity we both feel towards the Goths.<sup>69</sup>

With the Gothic kingdom now encompassed, Justinian renewed his diplomatic assault. His ambassador was Peter, whom Procopius describes as a trained speaker, and one “fitted by nature to persuade men”.<sup>70</sup> He did an excellent job on Theodahad, returning to Justinian with two varieties of submission. The first ceded Sicily to the Emperor and promised essentially that the Gothic king would henceforth rule Italy as Justinian’s clear subordinate. The second, to be produced only if the first failed to buy peace from the Empire, was a straightforward surrender - the entire Gothic kingdom in return for a pension. Procopius reports the conversation which elicited this cave-in, and though he clearly wasn’t present at least one historian believes he had his information from someone who was, namely Peter himself.<sup>71</sup> Theodahad, enquiring what would happen if the Emperor rejected his first offer, was informed, simply, he would then have to fight. He protested this was unjust, and Peter replied it was perfectly just and proper for each man to be true to his nature. For Theodahad, a philosopher who had espoused the teachings of Plato, of course it was unholy and unseemly to be engaged in bloodshed, and to bring about the deaths of so many men, but for Justinian, whose intention was to be a worthy emperor of the Romans, it was “not at all inappropriate to seek to acquire a land which has belonged from of old to the realm which is his own.”<sup>72</sup>

Of course Justinian rejected the first submission and settled on the second. But by the time Peter returned to Theodahad with this reply, the war in Dalmatia had taken a turn in the Goths’ favour and the philosopher king had had a change of heart. Accusing the ambassador of treachery, he put Peter and his party under guard. When the news reached Byzantium the order was given for Belisarius to invade Italy.

The written record reveals Justinian as a devious, implacable and obsessive opponent, but not necessarily a bloodthirsty one. **At the onset of the Gothic war, he twice came within an inch of regaining Italy without fighting a single battle on Italian soil. Which demonstrates that, determined though he was to restore Roman rule to the lost western provinces of the Empire, war was not his only, nor indeed his preferred method.**

Britain was in Justinian’s sights but not within his grasp. Operating this far north he would need to use proxies. Gildas and Procopius, between them, tell us what plans were laid for the reconquest in 540, but we have no evidence that a Vandal or

<sup>69</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars* V.3.30

<sup>70</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars* V.5.8-10

<sup>71</sup> J B Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, footnote to p173

<sup>72</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars* V.6.10

Ostrogothic fleet ever set sail for Britain, or that a Frankish army ever crossed the channel to make good the Frank king's claim to rule the island. However, military invasion was not the only option open to Justinian, nor the only possibility Gildas presented to the Pelagian tyrants. If they wished to escape the coming crisis, they could simply surrender in advance.

Gildas sought to inspire, in the five men he addresses by name, the same terror which ambassador Peter inspired in King Theodahad, with the same threats: War was coming, defeat was inevitable, utter ruin was staring them in the face. And he offered them the same way out, wrapped up in his usual, biblical metaphors:

Look back, I pray you, and come back to Christ ... Come to him who does not want the death of a sinner, but rather his conversion and life.

... shake yourself free of your stinking dust, and turn with all your heart to your creator, so that 'when his anger shortly blazes forth you may be blessed, hoping in him' ...

... for the eyes of the Lord will be on you as you do good things and his ears will go out to your prayers, and he will not destroy your memory from the land of the living.

'Wash your heart clean of wickedness, Jerusalem', as it is said, 'and be saved'. Do not reject, I beseech you, the unspeakable mercy of God, who by his prophet thus calls the wicked to leave their sins: 'I shall speak suddenly to the people and to the kingdom, to uproot and scatter and destroy and ruin'. This is how he vehemently encourages the sinner to repent: 'And if that people repents its sin, I shall repent of doing the evil thing I said I should do to them.'

'If your sins are like scarlet dye, they shall become white as snow. If they are red like vermilion, they shall be white as wool. If you are willing and hear me, you shall eat the good things of the earth. But if you are unwilling and provoke me to anger, the sword will devour you.'<sup>73</sup>

In Gildas' 'sermon', God and Rome are indissolubly united, rebellion against one is rebellion against the other, heresy and political independence are the same thing. When Gildas advises Constantine of Dumnonia to return to Christ, he means convert to Rome. When he informs Maglocunus that God's wrath may be turned aside, that God might 'repent' and show mercy, he means Justinian might. When he informs the five tyrants that they must be washed clean of their 'sins' he means they must renounce Pelagianism, and when he tells them the alternative is to be 'devoured by the sword', he is not referring to some punishment in the afterlife. He means war, a mundane physical attack by their fellow men in the here and now. It is surprising that

<sup>73</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 29.2, 30.3, 31.2, 36.2, 42.5

historians of Dark Age Britain have missed this point, given the context in which Gildas' biblical threats are uttered:

What will our ill-starred commanders do now, then? The few who have found the narrow path and left the broad behind are prevented by God from pouring forth prayers on your behalf as you persevere in evil and so grievously provoke him. On the other hand, if you had gone back to God genuinely (for God does not want the soul of a man to perish, and pulls a man back when he is cast out in case he is utterly destroyed), they could not have brought punishment upon you: after all the prophet Jonah himself could not on the Ninevites, for all his desire to.<sup>74</sup>

The lost Roman province of Britannia was a long way from Byzantium. Operating at this distance, Justinian would have had to use proxies, not only to retake the island but to hold it for Rome. And what cheaper option could there be than the conversion of the current incumbent?

Maglocunus, Maelgwn of Gwynedd, that "dragon of the island" as Gildas names him, "mightier than many both in power and malice, more profuse in giving, more extravagant in sin", "higher than almost all the generals of Britain, in your kingdom as in your physique", the last of the tyrants whom Gildas condemns is the primary object of his assault. Gildas devotes as much space to this man as to all the other four combined. Understandably, for **on Gildas' evidence Maelgwn is not only the chief of the Pelagian tyrants, he is the one most likely to convert to Rome.** For Maelgwn had done this once already:

After your dream of rule by force had gone according to plan, were you not seized by the desire to return to the right road? Perhaps remorseful in the knowledge of your sins, you ... vowed to be a monk for ever ... what would be the joy of the church our mother if the enemy of all mankind had not somehow stolen you, to her grief, from her very bosom.<sup>75</sup>

If Maelgwn could convert once he could do so again, and I believe we have evidence that indeed he did. Among the sins of this tyrant which Gildas lists, beside the warmongering, the kin murders and the illicit sex, there is this:

Your excited ears hear not the praises of God from the sweet voices of the tuneful recruits of Christ, not the melodious music of the church, but empty praises of yourself from the mouths of criminals who grate on the hearing like raging hucksters - mouths stuffed with lies and liable to bedew bystanders with their foaming phlegm.<sup>76</sup>

Maelgwn of Gwynedd had, wickedly, revived the Celtic tradition of praise-singing

<sup>74</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 50.1

<sup>75</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 34.1-3

<sup>76</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 34.6

bards at his court. This tradition was to last, as we have seen, into the twelfth century and beyond. The rights and duties of these court bards were regulated by a law code said to be compiled in the tenth century, but containing laws from a much earlier period. Among them is the following: “When the king wishes to listen to songs, let the chief poet sing two songs to him in the upper hall, one of God and another of the kings”.<sup>77</sup> This looks like a precise response to Gildas’ condemnation.

These Welsh court bards, as said,<sup>78</sup> came under the power of the Church from an early period. In consequence, their tradition ossified. By the twelfth century their privileged position at court came under threat from ‘vulgar rhymesters’ whose tradition did not preclude them from telling stories. The court poet Phylip Brydydd, defending the privileges of his caste against these intruders, pointedly associates that caste, and the origin of its privileges, with Maelgwn. The medieval Taliesin, in his attack on the court bards, likewise associates them with Maelgwn. John Rhys holds that the quarrel between these two classes of bard did indeed date back to the days of Maelgwn, and suggests it may have somehow combined with the Pelagian controversy. Maelgwn, in his view, genuinely was the patron of the more Christian orthodox bardic school.<sup>79</sup> This, again, would suggest that Gildas’ reproof did not fall on deaf ears.

Even if we exclude all this late, legendary Welsh material from the equation, there is still convincing evidence for Maelgwn’s reconversion to Rome in the contemporary written record. The Dark Age British were literate. Gildas’ ‘sermon’ is the only document to have survived from the sixth century, for the survival of documents from this era relies on the deliberate intention to preserve. Not so **stone inscriptions**. A considerable number of commemorative texts, carved in stone, have been discovered in Britain dating to the fifth and sixth centuries. Hilbert Chiu describes them as an “underutilised historical source” in his *The political function of ‘early Christian’ inscriptions in Wales*,<sup>80</sup> which article makes a study of the inscriptions found in north-west Wales - Maelgwn’s territory. There are over fifty of these, and Chiu points out that, in contrast to those in the rest of Britain, they “exhibit a surprising degree of *Romanitas* on the part of the people they commemorate.” Chiu argues that they are a claim to legitimate authority: Gwynedd’s ruling elite, actually a military aristocracy, sought to present itself as both Christian and Roman, and thus owing its power to something other than brute force. Why this should have been an issue in this region of Britain, rather than any other, is a question Gildas helps to answer. He presents Maelgwn as one tyrant who ought to have known better, having received a properly Roman education, and as exercising some sort of supremacy over the other British kings. **Legitimate power, for Gildas, is Roman. It would seem the Gwynedd elite came to share his opinion.** Chiu considers it relevant that Gwynedd’s claim to supremacy continued into the medieval period, that the *Historia Brittonum* - a Gwynedd based text

<sup>77</sup> from the law code of Hywel Dda, see Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Quest for Merlin*, p41

<sup>78</sup> see above, Book 2, Chapter 8.5 *Taliesin’s Secret*

<sup>79</sup> John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*, p547

<sup>80</sup> In the *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, Volume 2 2006

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~medieval/jaema2/chiu.html>

- portrays post-Roman Britain as a united state resisting foreign invasion, and the *Welsh Annals* title early kings of Gwynedd *rex Brittonum*. The kings of Gwynedd were presenting themselves as the rightful rulers of all Britain, and clearly felt *Romanitas* was a necessary part of that claim.

Hilbert Chiu suggests that, in the light of this elite preoccupation, “the possibility of direct diplomatic contacts between Britain and the Roman empire of Justinian merits reconsideration”. I would go further. **The contemporary Gwynedd inscriptions and the later bardic tradition, taken together, indicate that Justinian’s threats, issued through Gildas, produced the desired effect in Maelgwn,** just as they had earlier with Theodahad. In this case the tyrant’s resignation was not required. Justinian could not have imposed direct Roman rule in Britain, he could not even do so in Gaul. A king in the Frankish mould, striving to prove his *Romanitas* and his religious orthodoxy, the kind of ruler who could never feel secure unless the Emperor ratified his title, is the best that Justinian could have hoped for and this, according to the surviving evidence, is exactly what he got in Maelgwn.

**But if Maelgwn’s submission bought off Justinian’s assaults in his own period, it conveyed no long term benefit to his dynasty. In contrast to the Cerdingas, the royal house of Gwynedd achieved no lasting dominion over Britain, only their empty claim rang through the centuries. The Roman/Christian inscriptions ceased to be carved by the seventh century. By that time Rome had selected a new sword-arm for the island. British *imperium* was deemed to be safer in the hands of English rulers,** first Aethelbert of Kent, then his son-in-law Edwin of Northumbria who, Bede tells us, had a Roman standard known as a tufa carried before him whenever he walked abroad, and who married a descendant of Clovis. His rule lasted until 633, when the wicked British king Caedwalla rebelled against his righteous rule, and slew him. This, according to orthodox British history, was the last gasp of independent Britain.

If it had been left up to Bede, we would never know that the rebel king Caedwalla was a direct descendant of the British tyrant whom Gildas called the dragon of the island. If it had been left up to Bede’s contemporaries we would never have known of his successful rebellion, if we are to believe what Bede himself tells us.

According to *The History of the English Church and People*, after the death of the glorious King Edwin who had reigned over English and Britons alike, Northumbria dissolved back into its constituent kingdoms. The kingship of Deira was inherited by Osric, a cousin of Edwin’s, but in Bernicia the old dynasty was restored. Eanfrid, eldest son of Aethelferth, regained his father’s throne. Both these kings were baptised Christians, but both apostatised and returned to the faith of their ancestors - with inevitable consequences, as Bede sees it. They were both slaughtered by the godless Caedwalla, who then ruled Northumbria for a full year. In consequence “this year remains accursed and hateful to all good men, not only on account of the apostasy of the English kings, by which they divested themselves of the sacraments of the Faith, but also because of the savage tyranny of the British king. Hence all those calculating the reigns of kings have agreed to expunge the memory of these apostate kings and

to assign this year to the reign of their successor King Oswald, a man beloved of God.”<sup>81</sup> So, a decision was taken among Bede's faction to falsify history. The reigns of two pagan English kings were to be expunged from the record, along with the brief recovery of the British *imperium*. If Bede had actually stuck to this agreement hatched among “all good men”, instead of telling us about it, the last gasp of independent Britain could have been put back to the previous century, perhaps back to the time of Maelgwn himself.

Geoffrey of Monmouth brings it forward by 56 years, to 689, when King Cadwallader, the last British king of Britain, abandoned his warlike preparations for regaining his lost kingdom on the instructions of an Angelic Voice, and journeyed from his uncle's court in Brittany to Rome, where he died of a sudden illness on the twelfth day of the Kalends of May,

It has been suggested that there is some confusion here between Caedwalla of Wessex and Cadwaladr the Blessed of Gwynedd, the son of Edwin's nemesis, who, according to the *Welsh Annals*, died of the plague in 682. But if Geoffrey has here confounded two historical characters it is not by accident. Geoffrey, as usual, reworks his source material and he intends us to observe that, in this case, his source is Bede. Bede's Caedwalla, like Geoffrey's Cadwallader, dies on the twelfth day of the Kalends of May (20th April) in the year 689 AD. Both receive a sacrament from Pope Sergius just prior to their deaths, for Bede's Caedwalla, Baptism, for Geoffrey's Cadwallader, Confirmation. Bede's Caedwalla brings "mystic gifts", i.e. relics, to Rome, Geoffrey's Cadwallader is informed by the Angelic Voice that the Britons cannot regain their land until the relics taken from Britain to Rome are returned. To make absolutely sure we get the point, Geoffrey begins his tale of Cadwallader with the statement "This is the youth whom Bede called Cliedvalla" - and Bede, of course, first introduces Caedwalla as "a daring young man of the Gewissae". Geoffrey even ties the Gewissae lineage into his tale - Cadwallader's maternal grandmother is of that people. No, there is no accident, this is Geoffrey's usual method.

It is Bede's Caedwalla whom Geoffrey presents as the last king of Britain, a Saxon ruler with a British name and no English forebears or English descendants anywhere in Bede's account. Geoffrey is not confused, and he is not out to confuse us. We should always bear in mind that he is not addressing himself to the credulous. His intention is always to open his readers' eyes to the historical evidence, to the source documents from which his opponents constructed their monkish, anti-British histories. When he directs us to Bede's valiant young Saxon exile, St. Wilfrid's pagan patron who, in the space of two years and with immense slaughter, made himself master of the West and South Saxons and then took himself off to Rome to die of piety, he is not asking us to baldly accept either his account, or Bede's. He is inviting us to read between the lines.

### **Arthur's Nephew**

Medieval readers had a choice of two versions of the fall of Independent Britain; an

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<sup>81</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.1.

English perspective based on Bede, favoured and promoted by the monk Reformers, and a British perspective, brought to a non-British readership by Geoffrey of Monmouth but clearly derived from earlier British traditions. The former has gone on to form the basis of early English history to this day, the latter is now dismissed as legend. In Bede's version the dominion of the wicked British nation over the island was replaced by that of God's new Chosen People, the English, in pretty much a straight fight, one on one. Geoffrey's story, in contrast, involves a huge cast of characters: Picts, Scots, Huns, Norwegians, Danes, Romans and their many allies, Franks, Africans and of course, the Saxons. But these foreign nations, even in combination, would have stood no chance of taking over the island if the natives had remained united. It was civil war, and native treachery which gave Britain into the power of the Saxons.

It was treachery that destroyed the Arthurian Golden Age. Geoffrey tells us that it was Arthur's own nephew, Mordred, who raised the flag of rebellion against him, taking advantage of his absence abroad, fighting off the threat of a Roman invasion. The villainous nephew Mordred, Arthur's opponent at the final battle of Camlann, is now a fixed element of the Arthurian legend. But *The History of the Kings of Britain* is the first recorded mention we have of Arthur's nephew and nemesis.

Geoffrey invented nothing: choose what mockery he made of the sources he used, the evidence is, he always had sources. So where did he get this story from? The first and obvious source is the *Welsh Annals*. The relevant entry reads "Year 93, The strife of Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut fell, and there was death in Britain and in Ireland." That Medraut is Mordred is universally accepted, the former is the Welsh form of the name, the latter the Cornish and Breton version. But who, exactly, is this character?

This 'Year 93' entry is, of course, one of two Arthurian entries, the other being Badon, dated to 'Year 72'. Since Badon was fought in 497, we can date Camlann to 518, twenty-one years later. Of course, for Dark Age historians, both these entries must be dismissed as later, legendary intrusions, historically worthless, since Arthur never existed: Badon was fought by some other British commander and no one could have fallen with Arthur at Camlann. Yet all the other characters mentioned in the Annals are historical, and we have evidence for the existence of Medraut quite independent of the Arthurian tradition.

Among the surviving Welsh genealogical records there is one called *Bonedd Y Saint*, that is, *The Pedigrees of the Saints*. One of the saints listed is Domnoc, who, according to John Morris, gave his name to Dunwich in Suffolk, which later became the see of the bishop of the East Angles, called 'civitas Domnoc' in Bede's history.<sup>82</sup> The father of this individual is named Medraut.

Welsh tradition prior to Geoffrey does not regard Medraut as a villain or a traitor. He seems rather to have been held up as a paragon of military virtue and good breeding. There is, indeed, no hint in the earliest reference to Medraut, in the Annals, to suggest that he and Arthur were enemies. They could just as easily have fallen in battle fighting on the same side. And no one before Geoffrey calls Medraut Arthur's nephew. So why

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<sup>82</sup> John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 3, p51



does he?

Geoffrey compiled his history from three main sources and one of these does present us with a man who killed his uncle. Maelgwn of Gwynedd, Gildas' principle target, is accused by him of slaughtering "the king your uncle". It seems, indeed, to have been his earliest crime, committed "in the first years of your youth", and the one that brought him to power, since Gildas follows this accusation immediately with: "After your dream of rule by force had gone according to plan..." And as Maelgwn attacked this uncle "with sword and spear and flame" along with "nearly his bravest soldiers",<sup>83</sup> it would seem that the two men met in battle: But only one of them fell.

The identity of this uncle has been deduced from the Welsh genealogies. It is widely accepted that he is Owain Ddantgwyn, Owen White-Teeth, King of Rhos and father of Cynlas, that is Cuneglasus, the third of Gildas' Pelagian tyrants.

Was Owain Ddantgwyn the real King Arthur? John Rhys accepted that possibility back in the nineteenth century,<sup>84</sup> and it has more recently been put forward by Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman,<sup>85</sup> In *King Arthur, the True Story* they suggest that Arthur was the 'battle name' of Owain, and they point out that this would not be the only case of a character going down in history under his nickname: Caligula means 'little boot', and was never the given name of that emperor. The name Arthur suggests, and may derive from, the Welsh *Arth*, 'bear', and there is a gloss in a medieval edition of 'Nennius' which claims that Arthur translated into Latin means *ursus horribilis*, and that this Arthur was "cruel from his boyhood, a horrible son, a horrible bear, an iron hammer".<sup>86</sup> Owain's son Cuneglasus is addressed by Gildas as "you bear, rider of many and driver of the chariot of the Bear's Stronghold".<sup>87</sup>

According to Philips and Keatman, Owain and his son Cuneglasus were rulers of Powys, hence descendants of this Powys royal line are described in a ninth-century Welsh poem as 'heirs of great Arthur'. This poem, the *Canu Llywarch Hen*, commemorates Cynddylan, who died in battle against the English in the seventh century, describing him as 'vested in purple', which is to say, as the descendant of emperors. The last of this line, according to Graham Phillips, was Cyngen (that is, Concenn, he of the Greek cryptogram) who went to Rome in the mid-ninth century to dispute the claim of Charlemagne's descendants to the title of Holy Roman Emperor, carrying with him an Imperial sceptre as proof of his own descent from Emperor Maximus. He lost, and was executed by the Holy Roman Emperor Louis II. The *Welsh Annals* record Concenn's death in Rome in 854. The conventional view is that he was there on pilgrimage.

David Dumville, in his highly successful campaign to have Arthur's name eliminated from serious historical study, describes him as "a man without position or ancestry in pre-Geoffrey Welsh sources", as if this weird anomaly added something to

<sup>83</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 33.4, 34.1

<sup>84</sup> John Rhys, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, p8 & p47. Rhys attributes the theory to a Prof. Sayce, writing in the *Academy* 1884, Vol. xxvi, p139.

<sup>85</sup> jointly in *King Arthur, the True Story*, and in *The Search for the Grail* by Phillips alone.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p220

<sup>87</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 32.1

his case.<sup>88</sup> Arthur was the Britons' greatest hero, the lynchpin of their historical tradition. We would logically expect many royal houses to have claimed a link to his lineage, whether real or fictitious. But instead, the earliest extant genealogy of Arthur is that found in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and that was clearly invented by Geoffrey himself. But Geoffrey always had sources. When he makes Arthur the nephew of Gildas' holy Roman Ambrosius, he is directing us to William of Malmesbury's claim that the "warlike Arthur" operated under the authority of Ambrosius, "who was monarch of the realm after Vortigern". No earlier British tradition connects Arthur with Ambrosius, and William of Malmesbury is one of those monk historians whom Geoffrey mocks - which means he did not intend us to take this genealogy seriously.

Geoffrey directs us back to the sources. His principle source for the period following Arthur's death is very plainly Gildas. The five kings who followed him in succession onto the British throne are clearly Gildas' five contemporaneous tyrants, strung out in a line. But there is one substitution. The last of the five, coming after Malgo, is Keredic, hateful to God and to the Britons, whose treachery opened the island to foreign attack. Missing from the list is Cuneglasus, whom Gildas addresses as "you bear". He is made conspicuous by his absence. Turning from Geoffrey to his source, Gildas, his readers were bound to notice this individual. If scholars today can deduce that the uncle whom Maelgwn killed was the father of this man, whom Gildas calls the bear, then so could some, at least, of Geoffrey's contemporaries.

The surviving written record, as it stands, cannot tell us whether or not Owain Ddantgwyn was the real King Arthur. But the balance of evidence strongly suggests that Geoffrey of Monmouth intended his readers to make that identification.

### Admiral Theodoric

In the view of the Dark Age historians, sixth-century Britain is "politically dark" and must ever remain so, since the history of this period must be written from a single text, the only surviving contemporary British document. All the other source materials which might arguably have something to contribute to our understanding of this period now stand condemned as historically worthless, being too late in date and contaminated with legend. John Morris, who rejected the term Dark Age, advocated a very different approach to these despised Celtic sources. This era, he argued, was not 'dark' for lack of evidence, but because that evidence had not been systematically studied. The textual evidence, especially, was unusually complex. Though little contemporary documentation survives, scraps of genuinely early material have been preserved in later texts. To uncover their significance, historians must borrow from the techniques of archaeology. Just as there is a reason for every artefact being where it is found, so there is a reason for every statement in every text, and the historian's job is to unearth that reason. And as the archaeologist must clean off his finds and relate them to each other in order to draw any conclusions from his data, so the historian must remove the accumulated distortions of the centuries to discover what these fragments originally

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<sup>88</sup> see above, Chapter 1.5 *Sub-Roman Britain* & Chapter 2.15 *The Figure of Arthur*

said, and then relate their statements to each other. One statement, standing alone, is not worth much, but when a number of different texts, independent of each other, combine to tell a story which makes sense in context, then what we have is historical evidence.

His reconstruction of the career of Admiral Theodoric provides a good example of Morris' technique. Morris pieces this story together from a variety of sources, mostly saints' *Lives* of disparate dates originating from different parts of the Celtic world; Wales, Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany. The texts cannot be thought to have borrowed from each other. They do not tell the same story. They each provide different parts of a story which, when combined, fit together like a jigsaw. "In theory, it might be pure coincidence that all the detail fits, but it would be a most remarkable coincidence."<sup>89</sup>

The story opens in south Wales, in the first decades of the sixth century. Theodoric and Marcellus take part in a campaign against an Irish dominion established in Demetia, which is thereafter ruled by Agricola, the father of that Vortipor denounced by Gildas as the bad son of a good king. Vortipor's memorial stone survives, inscribed in both Latin and Ogham. So Vortipor's court was bilingual: The Irish weren't expelled, they were assimilated.

Next the story moves to the western tip of Cornwall, where Theodoric destroys an Irish invasion force attempting to land at Hayle, near St. Ives. The Irish were led by St. Fingar and Guiner who, one *Life* claims, was on his way to Brittany to aid his uncle Maxentius, whom Theodoric had "defeated and compelled to relinquish lands which he had recovered"<sup>90</sup> These lands, in Brittany, had been recovered by Maxentius and his brother Budic from Marcellus, whom they killed. Budic, however, was subsequently expelled and took refuge with Agricola in Demetia, ultimately to be restored to his Breton possessions with British aid. The political norms of the period suggest it was his brother Maxentius who forced Budic into exile. The textual evidence indicates the British force which restored him was led by Theodoric, the man who had placed Agricola on his throne, for Gregory of Tours tells us that Budic named his son and heir Theodoric, a highly unusual choice of name for a Briton, for the name is Germanic. The choice would make sense if Budic were honouring the man who had restored him to his kingdom.

So we have the name Theodoric, highly unusual in a British context, linked with Marcellus, a traditional Roman name but itself unusual in this region in this period, "not recorded for a lay notable in Gaul or Britain after the Marcellus whom the Roman nobility of Gaul tried to make emperor" in the 460s. The name Maxentius, for a layman is likewise almost unique, "recorded only for one other secular ruler in Gaul in these centuries" and "otherwise unknown to Britain or to hagiography". And here they are all three, linked together in a number of sources, themselves quite independent of each other, "the only Marcellus and the only Maxentius ... linked with the only Theodoric in the same generation, in the separate traditions of south Wales, of Cornwall, and of Brittany."<sup>91</sup> Coincidence seems an inadequate explanation.

<sup>89</sup> John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 3, p171

<sup>90</sup> John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 3, p170

<sup>91</sup> John Morris, *Arthurian Period Sources*, Vol. 3, p170

The sources in combination tell us Theodoric ended his days in Cornwall in the reign of Constantine (the tyrant denounced by Gildas as “whelp of the filthy lioness of Dumnonia”): One story names them together as two pious kings who gave Bodmin to St. Petroc. Most often he is located further west, near Truro, St. Ives and Falmouth. Lestowder, on the Helford river may preserve his name in the abbreviated form.

So who was Theodoric? His name, Morris argues, is not merely Germanic, but at this stage purely Gothic, so we have a Goth fighting for the British in the days of Emperor Arthur. German captains in that period were quite commonly employed by non-Germans, and usually recruited along with their men. Theodoric, judging from the range of his activities, would appear to have had a naval force under his command, hence Morris names him an admiral. A Gothic admiral fighting for the British makes perfect sense in this time. In 507, at the battle of Vouillé, the Visigoths of Gaul were defeated by Clovis and forced over the Pyrenees into Spain. Whilst they had held Aquitaine the Goths had maintained a Biscay fleet, which now lost its harbours. “No writer reports what happened to the ships and crews; but it is evident that a commander who had lost his homeland and his base might find it prudent to transfer all or part of his fleet to the service of the British; and Arthur’s campaigns had a use for a naval force.”<sup>92</sup>

Clovis was, of course, Rome’s sword arm, the military enforcer of Imperial Christianity in Gaul. If his contemporary, Arthur, was recruiting troops from amongst his enemies, this would obviously have political implications, implications which John Morris never got to explore. Had he lived, I think he would have amended his view that Arthur, with Ambrosius, must have fought to preserve Britain’s Roman inheritance, that there was nothing else he could have fought for. But he died prematurely, in the midst of his great work, with his Arthurian Period Sources still unfinished and unpublished.

Morris presented his *Age of Arthur* as a preliminary study, anticipating his history would be amended and expanded by the work of later scholars. His posthumous vilification put a full stop to any such possibility. Instead, Arthur himself has been written out of British history, and his Gothic ally Admiral Theodoric has found no takers among professional historians. There is nothing improbable in this man’s existence, each step of Theodoric’s career makes perfect sense, but the sources from which Morris composed this narrative are not the stuff from which history can be written. No reputable historian, witnessing John Morris’ fate, is likely to risk endorsing his Admiral Theodoric. And yet professional historians still can, without loss to their reputations, happily swallow Bede’s incredible tale of Caedwalla of the Gewissae.

### **Clovis and his Enemies**

In the view of John Morris, Arthur was “a mighty shadow, a figure looming large behind every record of his time, yet never clearly seen.”<sup>93</sup> In the view of the Dark Age historians, there are no such records. The period of British Independence, when the natives ruled their own country, is a Dark Age, not only because it is contemptibly inferior to the Roman dominion which preceded it, but also on account of the deplorable lack of

<sup>92</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p127

<sup>93</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p116

contemporary documentation which alone would enable a genuine history of the period to be written. The heroic past recounted in later Welsh, Cornish and Breton tradition is pure fantasy; Arthur was invented to fill a blank in British history.

We could put that another way: For the supposed years of Arthur's lifetime, the last decades of the fifth century and the first decades of the sixth, Britain has no history. All we have is a gap.

If there is a piece missing from the jigsaw, does that make the picture indecipherable? Every gap has edges. British history in the earlier fifth century is not really so obscure - it would be, if we had to rely on Gildas, but fortunately we don't. Nor is mid-sixth-century Britain as politically dark as some would have us believe, since in addition to Gildas we have Procopius. We know what happened before and after Arthur, and we know what was happening nearby, in the same period.

If history can only be written from the written record, still that doesn't excuse historians for dispensing with logic. The lack of a British record does not prove Britain an historical 'special case'. Her lost history cannot have departed far from the general run of history. Arthur's Britain was an island, not an hermetically sealed alternative universe. It was divided from mainland Europe by the same narrow, navigable channel that divides us still. In the ancient world, when water transportation was the cheapest and easiest way of moving people and goods, this was a highway, not a barrier. South Britain and northern Gaul were a cultural continuum even before the Roman invasion, according to Julius Caesar, and had been politically united for four centuries by the time Britain gained her independence. Nor did political contact cease at that point, as the written record amply demonstrates. The peoples on either side of the channel were of the same ethnicity and subject to the same historical forces and they were still talking to each other. The history of Britain in the deepest depths of the Dark Ages cannot be divorced from the history of Late Roman Gaul, and that history is known.

The last recorded political contact between Britain and Gaul in the fifth century is the Riothamus expedition in support of Emperor Leo's crusade against the Arians. A force of twelve thousand Britons under their king Riothamus was recruited by Leo's western colleague Anthemius, Jordanes tells us: It arrived by way of the ocean, met the Visigothic king Euric in battle and was annihilated. This was in 470 AD, the critical year to which Geoffrey of Monmouth draws our attention.

In consequence of Leo's failed Roman restoration, the political map of Europe was redrawn - as far as Rome is concerned, in just the manner that Geoffrey describes; all that remained of Roman Imperial territory was, effectively, the Italian peninsula. The rest of the western empire was now ruled independently by German Arian heretics, the largest kingdom being that of the Visigoths under Euric. Northern Gaul, however, remained independent of both Romans and Germans, under the rule of Syagrius. But in this same critical year Rome had sealed the doom of this independent Gallo-Roman kingdom, planting in northern Gaul a new German ally of Rome, the Franks under King Childeric, like a wasp's egg which would ultimately hatch and consume its host.

In 486 Childeric's son Clovis attacked and defeated Syagrius, who fled to Alaric,

king of the Visigoths. But Alaric was so afraid of Clovis, the Goths being a timid race, that he turned Syagrius over to him rather than risk war with the Franks - so Gregory of Tours tells us. "When Clovis had Syagrius in his power he ordered him to be imprisoned. As soon as he had seized the kingdom of Syagrius he had him killed in secret."<sup>94</sup>

Meanwhile the bulk of the Gallo-Roman population was subject to the rule of the Arian Visigoths. Many longed for the Franks to come and take over the government, according to Gregory. The rule of the Goths entailed dreadful sufferings for all who refused to subscribe to their heresy. Innocent Catholics were beheaded, priests were imprisoned, bishops exiled or executed, churches hedged about with briars to make it difficult for the people to enter. For confirmation he refers us to a letter of Sidonius Apollinaris to bishop Basilius.

This letter is a request for Basilius to use his influence with King Euric to secure the right of ordination for bishops now living under Gothic rule, so that they might replace their own numbers as necessary. Sidonius laments that where sees are left vacant after a bishop's death, congregations, left fatherless, scatter and are lost and the very church buildings collapse from neglect and become overgrown with brambles - which is a little different from the picture Gregory paints.

Sidonius Apollinaris was himself one of those bishops sent into exile by King Euric, punishment, it seems, for his part in Clermont's stiff resistance, led by his brother-in-law Ecdicius. Packed off to a remote country villa in the Pyrenees, the torments of his imprisonment were exacerbated by two elderly Gothic women gossiping outside his window while he was trying to sleep. Released after a short time he made his way to Euric's court in Bordeaux, where he was forced to suffer the painful indignity of being ignored. On returned to his see in Clermont, his friends, fearing his exclusion from the corridors of power was causing him to slide into depression, persuaded him to collect his letters for publication. Posterity owes them a debt of gratitude.

It is Sidonius Apollinaris who sums up for us, in pithy statements, the predicament of the Gallo-Roman nobility of this era: "If the (Roman) State is powerless to succour, ... our nobility is determined to follow your lead, and give up their country or the hair of their heads"<sup>95</sup> "...if we cannot keep them (the Gallo-Roman population) by treaty for the Roman State, we may at least hold them by religion for the Roman Church."<sup>96</sup> His own life follows pattern he describes. A Roman patriot and orator, prefect of the City of Rome in 468-9 AD, he assisted in the defence of his native city only to see it surrendered to Gothic rule and his own Roman citizenship effectively cancelled by imperial decision. Within a matter of years he had attained a post within the Gallic Church, that last remnant of the Imperial bureaucracy where, in true Augustinian tradition, worldly rank was instantly convertible into ecclesiastical office - on the evidence of his own letters he was hardly the obvious choice for a bishopric. **It was by this means, by control of the Imperial Church in Gaul, that the Gallo-Roman political elite as a class held on to its wealth and position through the Visigothic period and**

<sup>94</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.18, 19

<sup>95</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, Letters. trans. O M Dalton (1915), 2.1 Letter to Ecdicius.

<sup>96</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, Letters. trans. O M Dalton (1915), 7.6 Letter to Bishop Basilius.

beyond. Sidonius' own family were still a power in the Auvergne region in the later sixth century, and were clearly well known to Gregory of Tours, their fellow Auvergnian, who cordially hated them.

The picture Bishop Gregory paints of Gothic rule is at odds with contemporary evidence. The Arian Goths never did subscribe to the Augustinian notion of forced conversion. Indeed the most famous Gothic ruler, Theodoric the Great, is on record as stating that "We cannot order a religion, because no one can be forced to believe against his will."<sup>97</sup> Nor is it possible to put this discrepancy down to Gregory's ignorance, a hundred years after the events he describes. He refers us to Sidonius' letter to Bishop Basilius, which we can read for ourselves and observe that he patently misrepresents its contents. And he records a dispute between himself and an Arian, envoy of the Spanish king and "a man of low intelligence, untrained in logical argument", during which the heretic criticised Gregory's vituperative language, stating: "You must not blaspheme against a faith which you yourself do not accept. You notice that we who do not believe the things which you believe nevertheless do not blaspheme against them."<sup>98</sup> Gregory, trained in logical argument as he was, held that his own belief in the Holy Trinity was proved true by the fact that the wicked heresiarch Arius died on the toilet, when his entrails emptied through his back passage. The Goths, then, were not the oppressive tyrants Gregory makes them out to be, nor is it likely that the Gallo-Romans under their rule eagerly awaited the conquest of Clovis, given what Gregory himself has to tell us about this first Christian King of the Franks.

The most famous incident is the 'vase of Soissons' story. In Gregory's narrative this is placed after the murder of Syagrius but before Clovis' conversion. At that time he still plundered churches, and from one he and his band had looted a vessel of great size and magnificence, which the bishop - Gregory doesn't say which bishop - asked to have returned. Clovis wished to oblige, but was apparently bound by Frankish rules governing the distribution of booty. He had to ask his men for the vase, requesting it be given to him over and above his normal share. This anti-egalitarian stance met with the approval of the more rational of his freebooters, who opined that both they and the booty were entirely in his power, but one reckless soul replied in outrage that he should have no more than his fair share, and smashed his axe down on the ewer, reducing it at once to divisible scrap metal. Clovis concealed his intent, patiently waiting a year, then assembled his troop on the parade ground. Prior to a military engagement, it appears, the commander's power was absolute. Taking advantage of this, Clovis approached the man in question and threw his weapons to the ground, claiming they were poorly maintained, and as he stooped to pick them up Clovis smashed an axe down on his head saying "thus you did to my vase in Soissons".<sup>99</sup>

Further axe murders followed after Clovis' conversion. First on Gregory's list is that of Chloderic, son of King Sigibert, who fought with Clovis at Vouillé. He was Clovis' nephew, if we are to take literally Clovis' own statement that Sigibert was his brother - and it seems logical to assume that the polygamous King Childeric, exiled for

<sup>97</sup> Cassiodorus, *Variae Epistolae*, II.27

<sup>98</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, V.43

<sup>99</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.27

wantonness in Gregory's own account, did not die leaving the fifteen-year-old Clovis as his sole heir. Sigibert was lamed through a battle injury, according to Gregory, and so Clovis sent secretly to Chloderic, saying "your father is old and he is lame in one leg. If he were to die, his kingdom would come to you of right and my alliance would come with it." Gregory then remarks that Chloderic began to plot his father's death, led astray, not by Clovis incitement, but by his lust for power. Once the deed was done and the kingdom seized, Chloderic soon discovered that in fact Clovis' alliance did not come with it. As, presumably, they had earlier agreed, Chloderic informed Clovis of the situation and invited him to send his envoys to select whatever he wanted out of Sigibert's treasure. Clovis claimed he wanted nothing, but sent the envoys anyway, just to see the stuff. Whilst Chloderic was displaying the treasure to them, with his hands in the chest, one of the envoys split his skull with an axe. The unworthy son thus shared the fate of his father, Gregory remarks, and meanwhile the very worthy Clovis presented himself to the now kingless people and declared himself blameless; Chloderic had put it about that he wanted Sigibert murdered but he'd been out sailing at the time, and as for Chloderic himself, he had been killed whilst displaying his treasure by "somebody or other. I take no responsibility for what has happened. It is not for me to shed the blood of one of my fellow kings, for that is a crime". Clovis went on to suggest that the people should now accept him as their king, which they did, Gregory commenting that: "Day in day out God submitted the enemies of Clovis to his dominion and increased his power, for he walked before Him with an upright heart and did what was pleasing in His sight."<sup>100</sup> This wording, funnily enough, refers us to the biblical passage, 1 Kings 3.6-12, in which Solomon asks God for the gift of wisdom, that he might be worthy to rule his kingdom.

The next enemy God submitted to Clovis was King Chararic, executed along with his son for having failed to join Clovis in his attack on Syagrius - he was waiting to see who would win, intending to offer the hand of friendship to the victor. The next axe murder, however, was King Ragnachar, who did join with Clovis against Syagrius. Gregory tells us he was a blood-relation of Clovis, and a womaniser with a best friend who was just as bad - so clearly he deserved to die. Clovis bribed Ragnachar's own bodyguard to betray him. When he and his brother Ricchar were brought before him in bonds Clovis expressed outrage at the disgrace Ragnachar had brought on the Frankish people by allowing himself to be so humiliated, and split his skull with an axe. Then he turned to Ricchar and declared that if he had stood by his brother this could never have happened to him, and killed him the same way. After this the traitors discovered the bribes they'd received, in the form of gold jewellery, were actually plated bronze. They complained to Clovis, who said this was the kind of gold men deserved who deliberately lured their lord to his death, and they were lucky he didn't torture them to death. At which, says Gregory, they begged forgiveness, saying it was enough for them that they were allowed to live. Then we learn that there was a third brother who was also killed by Clovis, though Gregory doesn't tell us whether this one was bound and taunted first. After his murder Clovis took over the brothers' kingdom, no doubt

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<sup>100</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.40



God willing.

This is not the full list of Clovis' kin murders, for Gregory goes on to say:

In the same way he encompassed the death of many other kings and blood-relations of his whom he suspected of conspiring against his kingdom. By doing this he spread his dominion over the whole of Gaul. One day when he had called a general assembly of his subjects he is said to have made the following remark about the relatives whom he had destroyed: 'How sad a thing it is that I live among strangers like some solitary pilgrim, and that I have none of my own relations left to help me when disaster threatens!' He said this not because he grieved for their deaths, but because in his cunning way he hoped to find some relative still in the land of the living whom he could kill.<sup>101</sup>

The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1908<sup>102</sup> would have us believe that these shocking stories Gregory recounts are mere oral tales, the product of the barbarian imagination, of no historical worth. And it is true that Gregory lards his history with slanderous gossip, some of it demonstrably false. But on the other hand we know that the Merovingian system of inheritance did result in continual fratricide among the royal family. Gregory also tells us that two of Clovis' sons killed two of his grandsons when the boys were only ten and seven years old, and no historian appears to doubt the truth of this. And he does not intentionally repeat these stories to Clovis' discredit. Clovis is to Gregory what Edwin is to Bede, the hero of his narrative and the champion of his Church. He didn't make this stuff up. This is how Clovis was remembered in later times. And it is this man, with this reputation, that the Gallo-Romans under Gothic rule looked to for rescue, so Gregory tells us. And he gives us an example: Rodez.

In Gregory's narrative this story comes immediately after an account of Clovis' meeting with King Alaric, Euric's successor, at which the two swore eternal friendship to each other, ie, some little time before Vouillé. The story begins with: "At that time a great many people in Gaul were very keen on having the Franks as their rulers. It was as a direct result of this that Quintianus, the Bishop of Rodez, fell into disfavour and was driven out of his city. The townsfolk started saying to him: 'If you had your way, the Franks would take over our territory.'" So, St. Quintianus was one of those fifth columnists whose plotting facilitated Clovis' conquest of Gaul. The Goths suspected him, Gregory tells us, the townspeople openly accused him, and Gregory himself has effectively admitted the charge. The end result was that the wicked people of Rodez plotted to assassinate their saintly bishop and he, not being the stuff of which martyrs are made, fled "with the more trustworthy among his attendants."<sup>103</sup> He ended up in Clermont where, according to Gregory, he was once again made bishop, four years after the death of Clovis, ie in 515 AD.

So there we have it. The great many people who were keen to be ruled by the

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<sup>101</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.42

<sup>102</sup> Godefroid Kurth, *Clovis*, The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 4. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908 [www.newadvent.org/cathen/04070a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04070a.htm)

<sup>103</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.36

Franks were, in this case, one bishop and some of his attendants. The vast majority of his flock, we are not surprised to discover, preferred the rule of a tolerant Goth to that of a psychopathic axe murderer. Unfortunately for them God, or at any rate the Empire and its Church, favoured Clovis.

The history of fifth-century Gaul, in the view of Enlightenment-biased historians of the last century, was the story of the slow death of the Western Roman Empire. Rome didn't fall to Alaric in 410 AD, she fell piecemeal. The barbarian tide washed over the Rhine and the Danube and slowly submerged the superior culture of the ancient world. After the last Western Roman Emperor was dethroned in 476 a corner of Roman Gaul still rose above the flood, but by 486 all was lost. The Roman Empire in Gaul finally ended when the Frank king Clovis destroyed the kingdom of Syagrius. This historical perspective would have astonished Gregory of Tours.

History serves the needs of the present, and it tends to get distorted for that reason. The term Dark Ages is still with us, and a great deal of Enlightenment prejudice has survived along with it. The horrid vision of barbarian hordes, streaming into the civilized Roman Empire bent on its destruction, has not disappeared from western consciousness, though historians of this period are perfectly aware that it didn't happen like that. In fifth-century Gaul there were indeed those who were bent on the Empire's destruction, but they were not the Germans. It was the *bacaudae*, the native peasantry in revolt, who attempted to overthrow Roman rule. How much sympathy there was for them among townsmen and the nobility it is difficult to determine, but there were some who spoke out on their behalf, primarily devout Christians of a non-Imperial persuasion. As for the Germans, there were those who supported the Empire, and those who opposed it, and the same group could switch between these alternatives, depending on the deal on offer. The Gallo-Roman elite on the whole upheld the Empire - but which Empire? Constantine III, Jovinus, Avitus, all enjoyed widespread support. We have it on record that the nobility of Gaul conceived a plan to revive the western empire by taking over control of it themselves - with Gothic support. This was a rescue which the East, and the Italians, could not countenance. Ultimately the East chose, for Gaul, the rule of the pagan Franks whose king Clovis converted to the Imperial faith at the end of the century - that is, if Gregory of Tours is to be believed. He claims Clovis was baptised in 496, the year before Badon. More recent scholarship puts the date as late as 508, a year after Vouillé.<sup>104</sup>

In Gaul at the start of the fifth century there was no simple division into two sides; relations between the German tribes and the various Roman factions were a shifting kaleidoscope of alliances and intrigues. But by the start of the sixth century the political map had simplified. Now there were just two political factions in Gaul. On the one side was the Eastern Empire and its tool, the Franks under Clovis, along with those Gallo-Romans, churchmen and laity, who still believed in the rule of Empire. On the other side were the Goths, and all those Gallo-Romans whose imperial loyalties had dissolved. If that description fitted a sizeable chunk of the Gallo-Roman elite in the days of Arvandus, we can be pretty sure it covered a substantial majority in some

<sup>104</sup> Danuta Shanzer (1998) Dating the baptism of Clovis: the bishop of Vienne vs the bishop of Tours, in *Early Medieval Europe* Volume 7 Issue 1 Page 29-57, March 1998.

Gallic regions by the start of the sixth century, when these ex-Roman citizens woke up to the arrangements the Eastern Roman Empire had made for them.

From Gregory of Tours we learn that a contingent from his native region took part in the battle of Vouillé, led by the son of St. Sidonius Apollinaris, though Gregory doesn't identify him as such. All he has to say on the matter is contained in one sentence: "A large force of Auvergnats took part in this battle, for they had come under the command of Apollinaris; their leaders, who were of senatorial rank, were killed."<sup>105</sup> It is noticeable that Gregory doesn't actually tell us which side Apollinaris and the Auvergnian senators supported, but there is a consensus view among Late Roman historians: The grandson of Emperor Avitus fought beside King Alaric, against Clovis.

### **Joseph and his Brothers**

The years of Arthur's lifetime are the worst recorded in British history, but the political and military situation in contemporary Gaul, just across the channel, is laid out in some detail. Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* is our prime text for the outline history of this period, but he does not stand alone. There are Roman and Gothic historians whose territories overlap his, and there are surviving contemporary documents. These expand his narrative, at times confirming, at times correcting it. For example, the evidence for redating Clovis baptism to twelve years after Gregory would have it is a surviving letter to Clovis from Bishop Avitus of Vienne, dated to 508. In Britain, in contrast, there is no continuous narrative account of this period earlier than Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain*. The ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* has a paragraph listing Arthur's victories, but no more. As for contemporary documents, in the second half of the fifth century Sidonius Apollinaris wrote a letter to Riothamus when the British ruler was resident in Gaul, and St. Patrick from Ireland wrote two letters to British recipients, but these have little to tell us of the political situation in Britain, and they were written elsewhere. A surviving letter from Bishop Fastidius, written in Britain around 410, does shed a little light on the political events of his time, but that's it. Almost nothing survives, we are plunged into darkness, but when the lights come back on again, in 540 with Gildas' sermon, what we see is exactly the same two factions opposing each other in Britain as in Gaul.

By far the majority of Britons are, in Gildas' day, sunk in wickedness and rushing headlong to hell, afflicted by the congenital sin of their race; rebellion against the rightful Roman authorities, also known as heresy. We can name that heresy: The British Church, and its tyrant defenders, were Pelagian. But Gildas never mentions Pelagius or the Pelagians. Instead, he tells us it was the Arian treason which caused the fatal separation of brothers who had lived as one, in consequence of which the island, though still Roman in name, ceased to be so by law and custom and sent a sprig of its own bitter planting, Emperor Maximus, to Gaul.

Gildas' own faction, the loyal Roman imperialists, are at this point very much in the minority. The few who have found the narrow path and left the broad behind, the few, the very few who are not rushing headlong to hell and who support his weakness from

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<sup>105</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.37

total collapse, the very few good shepherds, are now so small a number that the holy mother church, in a sense, does not see them. They risk being swept away in the coming storm, Gildas informs them, because they have not opposed the heretical majority with sufficient zeal. And that is a fate they should, by rights, welcome.

Yes, Gildas does say that. In his address to the Good Priests he brings up the example of Moses, who spoke on the mountain with the Lord and returned to terrify the rebellious people "with a face that was horned, displeasing and dreadful to look at", so far, so Gildas, but in addition: "Which of them, like that same Moses, when begging for the sins of his people, cried from the bottom of his heart: 'Lord, this people has committed a great sin: but if you forgive them, forgive them; otherwise, blot me out of your book?'"<sup>106</sup>

In Britain, as in Gaul, we see the same disillusionment among the erstwhile supporters of Rome. Gildas' faction is reduced to a rump, and he himself admits that even these loyal Romans can expect no mercy from Justinian; If they are not sufficiently useful to him, they too will be swept away: And replaced by what? Gildas doesn't say. However he does leave us with one hint.

In Gildas' address to the Good Priests, among all the biblical examples he lines up in support of separation, exclusion, punishment of rebels, warmongering, provocation, self-martyrdom and the sacrifice of those one holds dear, there is one that stands out like a sore thumb: "Which, like Joseph, plucked the memory of an injury from his heart by the roots?"<sup>107</sup>

The Joseph referred to is, of course, he of the many coloured coat, the favourite son of Jacob who was sold by his own envious brothers into slavery in Egypt. If the Good Priests, the priests of the Imperial Church in Britain, are here exhorted to imitate the example of Joseph, who are they meant to forgive? Not the wicked heretics, their fellow Britons, clearly; the whole of this section runs contrary to that idea. No, the brothers referred to must be their fellow Empire loyalists. But what wrong did these brothers do to the Roman loyalists in Britain? Into whose foreign hands were they betrayed, and when? No other historian has, to my knowledge, noted this cryptic statement or attempted to interpret it. But given the known political situation in the period, there really aren't that many options.

According to Gildas it was this Roman Imperial faction, now reduced to a rump, which initiated the war against the pagan invaders of Britain and brought it to a successful conclusion at Badon, establishing, in the peace that followed, a properly Roman ordering of society. So, whilst the pagan Franks were destroying the last remnants of independent native rule in Gaul, the Gallo-Roman Kingdom of Syagrius, on the other side of the channel the independent British were reasserting native control, forcing the pagan Saxons, relatives of the Franks, into retreat. And both of these were Roman victories. By 507 Clovis had recovered Gaul from the Arians. Emperor Anastasius, in acknowledgement of his achievement, granted him an honorary consulship. The victor of Vouillé publicly celebrated this Roman honour, in St. Martin's church and in the streets of Tours, with all the appropriate rituals and

<sup>106</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69.5

<sup>107</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 69.4

accoutrements, as Gregory of Tours describes. This was, surely, the pinnacle of the Frank king's career, the climax of his reign, in the eyes of all Gallo-Roman imperialists. And what of his contemporary, the victor of Badon? Was his great triumph similarly acknowledged by that same Emperor Anastasius? Did he present himself to God and his people in some British basilica, clad in purple tunic and military mantle, crowned with a diadem? Did he ride through the streets of a restored provincial capital, scattering gold and silver coins from his own hand? Gildas doesn't say so.

The Roman victory of Badon is one more lie in the tissue of lies that comprises the historical introduction to Gildas' sermon. Britain's division into two factions, and the original cause of all her problems, he traces back to the Arian treason which sparked the usurpation of Emperor Maximus and so ended Roman rule in Britain. Wrong time, wrong emperor and the wrong heresy: Britain left the Empire three decades later, during the reign of Emperor Constantine III, at the time of the Pelagian controversy. Magnus Maximus, the patron of St. Martin, was rigorously orthodox. It was Valentinian, the boy emperor he forced from office, who was Arian. And Gildas certainly knew this, since he had read Orosius' history.

But of course, as David Dumville reminds us, Gildas doesn't have to tell us all he knows. He's not writing a history, he's writing a sermon, and the historical introduction is only there to support his case. He is free to leave Constantine III out of his tale entirely if mention of that usurper doesn't suit his purpose. And likewise he is free to leave Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor who was elevated to the purple in Britain, out of his summary of British history if it suits his purpose to do so. And if it suits him to misrepresent the ostentatiously orthodox Maximus as an Arian, well, why not? But then it must be acknowledged that, as every writer, even a dishonest one, has a motive, so **Gildas has to have a reason for all these alterations.**

**So what effect is produced by removing Constantine the Great from British history, pre-dating Britain's Withdrawal from the Empire and inverting the theological position of Magnus Maximus and his 'legitimate' opponent? For one, it makes an identification between the Arians and the native British heretics, whose disaffection really did have a part to play in Britain's exit from the Roman Empire. In so doing it projects the political divisions of sixth-century Europe, with the Romans on one side and the rebellious heretics on the other, back into the fourth century. In addition, it presents us with the concept of a northern emperor and it identifies that concept with heresy. Now why would Gildas do that in 540 AD?**

### **The Evidence of Brittany**

It was for naming Arthur an emperor that John Morris was hereticised. Before the publication of *The Age of Arthur* perfectly reputable academics had no difficulty accepting that the legend derived from an historical reality, a Romano-British general, heir to Gildas' Ambrosius Aurelianus, who continued his hopeless struggle against an inevitable Anglo-Saxon future. Arthur as an historical dead-end did not offend the sensibilities of Dark Age historians. Morris' British Emperor was a different matter.

Rejecting the "rigid complacency of historical determinism" Morris argued that

Arthur's struggle was not hopeless. He might have succeeded, and "permanently upheld in Britain a western state as Roman as the empire of the east, ruled from a London as imperial as Constantinople,"<sup>108</sup> and despite his failure his impact on later European history and politics was profound. He even had a noticeable effect on the political vocabulary of the **British Isles. This was the only area of Europe, up until Napoleon, where the title emperor was used of rulers who were not emperors of Rome,** and this insular use "revived the ghost of an ancient reality, the short-lived empire of Britain, whose last and most famous emperor was Arthur."<sup>109</sup>

David Dumville, who led the assault on Morris' academic reputation, accused him of presenting a medieval view of the period. His own view is, of course, equally medieval. What Dumville actually meant was that Morris' Emperor Arthur harked back to a view of this period popularised by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, and derived from that British historical tradition which has always stood in opposition to the Anglo-Roman tradition which lies at the root of his own historical perspective.

Geoffrey's story of Arthur's empire is incredible. But it was meant to be. He presents Arthur as a mighty king of the north, holding empire over all the territories that had been under Viking control prior to the expansion of Latin Christendom, and then some. Opposing him is the Roman Emperor Leo, with the massed forces of the orient and the south - including the Spanish under Ali Fatima. This is a patently Islamic name. The year, as we've established, is 470. This is almost two and a half centuries before the Muslim conquest of Spain, a hundred years before Mohammed was even born. Geoffrey wrote at the time of the crusades. His educated readers would have spotted the anomaly.

So, in the reign of Emperor Leo, the forces of the south and east are defeated by the forces of the northern emperor Arthur, but just as he is about to invade Italy he is obliged to break off his attack in order to deal with Mordred's rebellion. He crosses back over to Britain and receives his fatal wound at the battle of Camlann. Geoffrey tells us the year - 542 AD. The dates don't add up. And we are meant to notice.

Geoffrey is not trying to deceive anyone. He intends his readers to see how his history is constructed, and from what materials. Geoffrey always had sources. For the story of Arthur's Whitsun crown-wearing, the climax of his reign, Geoffrey is drawing on contemporary reality - the Norman kings of England wore their crowns in state at the Christian festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. His separation of men and women at mass and at the feast after, which Geoffrey calls the custom of Troy, intentionally echoes the custom of eastern church, and some among his readers will have visited Byzantium. But there are also literary echoes here. The image of Arthur, dressed in royal robes and wearing the crown of Britain, processing in state from the church of the British martyr St. Aaron, in one of the great metropolitan sees of Britain - doesn't that strike a chord?

Arthur is here at the height of his power, having defeated all the enemies against whom he had waged victorious war since the age of fifteen, when he inherited the throne on the death of his father. This is just the story that Gregory of Tours tells of

<sup>108</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p570

<sup>109</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p330

Clovis. Both kings at the climax of their reigns receive the emissaries of Rome. Clovis receives a letter from the Emperor acknowledging his great victory over the Arian heretics with a signal Roman honour, and is henceforth, Gregory tells us, titled Consul and Augustus. Arthur, in Geoffrey's story, has waged victorious war over Saxon pagans and Rome's response is to denounce his usurpation and demand his submission. The parallels are clearly deliberate; we are meant to compare and contrast.

Arthur responds to Rome's challenge with a speech which summarises Geoffrey's case against the papal claim to hold Britain as a fief. That case rests, not on the unknown British history which Geoffrey claimed as his source, but on the histories known to all educated men of his time. We are not asked to credit what he is saying but to look where he is pointing. Arthur's continental victories over Rome were a necessary part of the legal case Geoffrey constructed for his patron Robert of Gloucester, so Geoffrey directs us to look beyond the insular text of Gildas, Bede and 'Nennius' to the continental history preserved and promoted by his opponents, between the years 470 and 542. He directs us, in particular, to Gregory of Tours.

Arthur's British Empire was subject to exactly the same criticisms in the medieval period as in the modern. William of Newburgh in the twelfth century wondered mockingly how historians could have suppressed by their silence this British monarch whose conquests so far exceeded those of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. In the fourteenth century Ranulf Higden pointed out how odd it was that Arthur should have had so illustrious a career and yet go unmentioned in the chronicles of Rome, France and England, whose writers include so many small details about much less important men. And Geoffrey Ashe in the twentieth remarks, on Morris' mighty shadow "looming large behind every record of his time, yet never clearly seen" that "anyone so mighty ought surely to be recorded somewhere, and "clearly seen" at some point."<sup>110</sup> Well indeed, but by whom? In which chronicles of England, Rome and France should we expect to find Arthur? Geoffrey based his legal case on the documents preserved and promoted by his opponents and those texts are still with us. As far as insular text go, as Geoffrey demonstrates, the supposed disproof of Arthur comes down to just one document, Gildas' sermon, which fails to name the victor of Badon. As for Arthur's continental empire, once again there is only one text we have to consider, Gregory's *History of the Franks*.

If Arthur played any decisive role in Continental history, it would have to have been in the history of northern Gaul, and this is the only surviving contemporary or near-contemporary document which could have recorded that role. Gregory's history is a rather more substantial work than Gildas' sermon. Written in the last quarter of the sixth century, it covers the previous six thousand years, in ten volumes, beginning with the creation of the world, reaching Gaul in the second century AD with the Lyons martyrs - still in book 1 - and becoming increasingly detailed the nearer it approaches to Gregory's own lifetime. Unlike Gildas, Gregory does name names, hundreds of them, and they include his relatives and people he knew personally. As metropolitan

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<sup>110</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, p84

bishop of Tours, and scion of a prominent Gallo-Roman dynasty, he was at the heart of the political and military events of his era, and in the latter half of his book he is himself a participant in the events he records. His history is intensely personal, and the detail he includes is at times startling. For example, of the tax collector Parthenius, stoned to death by an angry mob in 548 he writes: "he used to eat aloes to give himself an appetite and to aid his digestion; and he would fart in public without any consideration for those present."<sup>111</sup> Unfortunately, for the era of particular interest to us here, he is rather less forthcoming.

Gregory has one thing very much in common with Gildas; both worship the God of Victories. For Gregory, as for Gildas, military success is proof of God's favour, as he states at the beginning of book 3: "Clovis, who believed in the Trinity, crushed the heretics with divine help and enlarged his dominion to include all Gaul; but Alaric, who refused to accept the Trinity, was therefore deprived of his kingship, his subjects and, what is more important, the life hereafter." Of course this is not unusual in the period; Bede ends his highly respected history with a very similar statement. But the history that actually happened does not always fit this pattern, so what will Bishop Gregory do then?

We have a perfect illustration of Gregory's coping mechanism in his account of Leo's Arian crusade. It is to Gregory that we owe certain details of the Riothamus expedition; the name of the village where so many Britons were killed, the presence of Count Paul, the arrival of Childeric. But if we did not have Jordanes account we could not hope to make any political sense of this incident. Gregory gives us no clue as to what the Britons were doing there. It is Jordanes who informs us that Emperor Anthemius, the western colleague of Emperor Leo, recruited the British under Riothamus. Gregory does not name the leader of the Britons. He does not mention Emperor Anthemius anywhere in his history, or Emperor Leo. In Gregory's account, there is no failed crusade against the Arians. There couldn't be, as victory is proof of God's favour.

In consequence of Leo's failed crusade the Goths were left in possession of most of Gaul. But not in Gregory's account. He tells us that Euric, King of the Goths, cruelly persecuted the Catholics in Gaul, but to do so he "crossed the Spanish frontier". Likewise, Euric "placed duke Victorious in command of seven cities".<sup>112</sup> Gregory doesn't name the seven cities or even tell us where they were, but just gives a hint: Victorious tried to add an eight to the tally, namely Clermont. In fact, Victorious was placed in charge of the Auvergne after it was ceded to Euric by Emperor Nepos, to the outrage and disgust of Sidonius Apollinaris. Now Gregory has access to Sidonius' letters. He even cites his letter to bishop Basilius as evidence for Euric's wicked persecution of the Catholics. Yet he does not admit what Sidonius clearly reveals, the Arian dominion over Gaul in the last quarter of the fifth century. He cannot, for dominion over Gaul is proof of God's favour, and God cannot have favoured an Arian heretic. Gregory knows the truth, but his history does not admit it. .

Gregory finally does tacitly admit the Gothic dominion over at least part of Gaul, but

<sup>111</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.37

<sup>112</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, II.20, 25



only at the point that his hero Clovis is about to end it. This occurs immediately after the story of saintly Quintianus, driven from the bishopric of Rodez by his wicked flock who feared he was about to betray them into the hands of the Franks. According to Gregory, the Catholic Christian king of the Franks suddenly announced to his ministers that he could no longer tolerate the presence of Arians in Gaul, and with God's help he intended to expel them. Battle was joined at Vouillé, near Poitiers, the Goths were defeated and their king slain, and then Clovis' son Theuderic went on to capture Albi, Rodez and Clermont - so clearly these towns were then in the hands of the Goths. Meanwhile Clovis wintered in Bordeaux, took all of Alaric's treasure from Toulouse, which city, we know, was the Goth king's capital, then went to Angoulême and expelled the Goths from this, another city which until then they had held. This last was a particularly easy victory, according to Gregory: so great was God's favour towards the Frankish king that the walls fell down when he gazed at them. It was after this that Clovis went to Tours and there received the diploma from Emperor Anastasius which conferred the consulate on him.

Even if we only had Gregory's own account to go on we might well be able to work out that this unremitting catalogue of Frankish triumph could not be the whole story. Clovis dies at the end of book 2. Early in book 3 Theuderic is again in Clermont, ravaging and destroying the entire region, which strongly suggests it was not quite as subdued as the Franks would have liked it to be. This, remember, is Gregory's own region, but rather than condemning Theuderic's treatment of his own people he lays the responsibility for the tragedy firmly at the door of a local noble, one Senator Arcadius.<sup>113</sup> Arcadius was the grandson of St. Sidonius Apollinaris, though we don't learn that from Gregory.

A little further on we find Theuderic and his brother Lothar sending their respective sons Theudebert and Gunthar to win back the lands which the Goths have recovered since the death of Clovis. We are not given any details of this Gothic recovery, and what we are told of the Merovingian cousins' campaign is not particularly informative. Theudebert went to Béziers, he captured Dio and sacked it, and the fortress of Cabrières surrendered to his threats. Meanwhile Gunthar advanced as far as Rodez, but then turned back, and Gregory tells us he does not know why.<sup>114</sup> We could guess. Rodez was a walled town whose inhabitants preferred Gothic to Frankish rule, as Gregory himself had already informed us. Fortified towns were not easy to take, hence the need for the miracle of Angoulême. Presumably God's favour towards Theudebert was not great enough to collapse the walls of Rodez.

Next we find a fugitive from Merovingian kin-murder fleeing to Arles, which town, though in Gaul, is occupied by the Goths. We are not told how the Goths came to occupy it, only that this had happened recently.<sup>115</sup> Clearly there is more to this story than Gregory chooses to tell us, and to find out what we can turn to **Procopius, who says that after Alaric's defeat and death "Theudoric had come with the army of the Goths, the Germans became afraid and broke up the siege (of Carcassone). So they**

<sup>113</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.11-13.

<sup>114</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.21

<sup>115</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.23

retired from there and took possession of the part of Gaul beyond the Rhone River as far as the ocean. And Theodoric, being unable to drive them out from there, allowed them to hold this territory, but he himself recovered the rest of Gaul."<sup>116</sup>

Clovis never did enlarge his dominion to include the whole of Gaul. He never reached the Mediterranean. His southward expansion was checked by Theodoric the Great, the mightiest Germanic ruler of his day and Clovis' own brother-in-law. Ruler of Italy from 493 to 526, Theodoric, at the height of his power, held sway over all the Germanic kingdoms now established in the western empire; in the words of Jordanes: "there was not a tribe in the west that did not serve Theodoric while he lived, either in friendship or by conquest."<sup>117</sup> Friendship was his preferred method: Theodoric sought to hold the Germanic world together through a series of marriage alliances. He himself married Clovis' sister, and married his own sister to the king of the Vandals. He married her child, his niece, to the king of the Thuringians, one daughter to a Burgundian king, and another to Alaric, king of the Visigoths. A third daughter was married to Eutharic, a Gothic noble from Spain who settled with his wife in Italy and there fathered Athalaric, whom Theodoric made his heir, and whom Emperor Justin recognised as such by naming Eutharic his co-consul for the year 519. Theodoric had made himself, in effect though not in name, the Western Roman Emperor. Though he failed to dissuade Clovis from violence, he did put a halt to Frankish expansion, and after the death of Gesalec he ruled the Visigothic territories in Gaul and in Spain as regent for his grandson Amalaric.

This Arian king makes an interesting contrast to Gregory's axe-wielding Clovis. He came to power in Italy by overthrowing Odoacer at the invitation of Emperor Zeno. But though he gained his position by force he sought to rule by law, providing justice for all, Goth and Roman, rich and poor, granting his subjects security in their property and freedom in their religion. He regarded it as his duty to increase the prosperity and prestige of the ancient heart of the empire, and his intentions are manifest in his surviving letters, addressed to his agents and ministers:

"impress upon all your subordinates that we would rather that our Treasury lost a suit than that it gained one wrongfully, rather that we lost money than the taxpayer was driven to suicide."

"Station persons in the harbours to see that foreign ships do not take away produce to foreign shores until the Public Providers have got all that they require."

"take care to use only those stones which have really fallen from public buildings, as we do not wish to appropriate private property, even for the glorification of the City."

These excerpts are from the letters of Cassiodorus, but though his Roman minister

<sup>116</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, V,12.44-5

<sup>117</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, LVIII

must be credited with their language, the rulings, and the sentiment, are Theodoric's. His address to the Roman Senate is a lesson in Christian morality which could have come from the pen of Pelagius: "We hear with sorrow, by the report of the Provincial judges, that you the Fathers of the State, who ought to set an example to your sons, have been so remiss in the payment of taxes that on this first collection nothing, or next to nothing, has been brought in from any Senatorial house. Thus a crushing weight has fallen on the lower orders, who have had to make good your deficiencies and have been distraught by the violence of the tax gatherers." Likewise, Theodoric's address to his sword-bearer illustrates the moral gap between the royal heretic and his brother-in-law, Gregory's Catholic champion "Let other kings desire the glory of battles won, of cities taken, of ruins made; our purpose is, God helping us, so to rule that our subjects should grieve that they did not earlier acquire the blessings of our domain."<sup>118</sup>

Theodoric succeeded in this ambition. Procopius tells us that on his death he was bitterly mourned by his subjects, that the only act of injustice that could be laid at his door was the execution of the philosopher Boethius and his father-in-law Symmachus (late in his reign when he had reason to fear the plotting of Justinian was undermining the loyalty of his Roman subjects): "And although in name Theodoric was a usurper, yet in fact he was as truly an emperor as any who have distinguished themselves in this office from the beginning; and love for him among both Goths and Italians grew to be great."<sup>119</sup>

Of course there was a contrary opinion. Pope Gregory the Great relates a story of how a holy hermit in Sicily knew of Theodoric's death in Ravenna on the very day it happened, because he saw the heretic, barefoot and bound between Pope John and Senator Symmachus, hauled up the sides of Etna and hurled by these two into the crater. By the twelfth century, in church legend, it is the devil himself, appearing as a black rider on a black horse, who throws Theodoric into the volcano.<sup>120</sup>

Gregory of Tours does not entirely exclude Theodoric from his history. He mentions him twice. The first incident is the sad story of his grandson Sigeric, who was strangled whilst still a boy. He was the son of King Sigismund of Burgundy by his first wife, "the daughter of Theodoric, king of Italy".<sup>121</sup> Gregory claims he was murdered on his father's orders at the instigation of his second wife, the boy's jealous stepmother. She persuaded her husband that the lad was plotting to kill his father in order to make himself king of both Burgundy and Italy. Once the deed was done the father grieved bitterly for his child and for his sin, but the vengeance of the lord still fell on him. Though he had renounced the Arian heresy he was killed by Clovis' son Chlodomer, along with his wife and remaining children.

The second story concerns Theodoric's daughter Amalasantha, Queen of Italy, and illustrates the wickedness of the Arian heretics. Gregory tells us her father died when

<sup>118</sup> Cassiodorus, *Variae Epistolae*, III.23, I.34, II.7, II.24, III.43

<sup>119</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, V, 1.29

<sup>120</sup> see *Black Horse and Haunted Fish: The Many Deaths of Theodoric* Ancient Worlds, [www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Article/842645](http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Article/842645)

<sup>121</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.5

Amalasantha was still a little girl and she was raised by her mother Audofleda, Clovis' sister. When she grew up she refused the honourable marriage her mother arranged for her with the son of a king and instead ran off with her lover, a slave named Traguilla.<sup>122</sup> Her mother sent soldiers who killed the lover and brought the girl back by force. She took her revenge by poisoning her mother's communion wine. Gregory comments: "What can these miserable Arian heretics say, when the Devil is present even at their altar? We Catholics, on the contrary, who believe in the Trinity, co-equal and all-powerful, would come to no harm even if we were to drink poison in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, one true Godhead."<sup>123</sup> The story is nonsense. The dates are enough to dismiss it. On the death of her father Queen Amalasantha became regent for her young son Athalaric. By then a widow, she was respectably married to consul Eutharic a good ten years previously. According to Procopius, Amalasantha "had the strictest regard for every kind of virtue."<sup>124</sup>

**If Gregory of Tours were our only source, all we would know of Theodoric the Great is that he was a king of Italy whose grandson was murdered by his own father, and whose daughter murdered her own mother. And on the last count, at least, we would be wrong.**

Gregory repeats unsubstantiated gossip and he omits inconvenient facts. Though he provides later historians with far more material than Gildas, he is hardly the ideal historical source. But for northern Gaul, in the period in question, he is what we have to go on.

There are twelve references to the Bretons on the Continent in Gregory's history, and half of them are accounts of the border war waged between Gregory's patron, Good King Guntram, and the Breton ruler Waroch for possession of Rennes and Nantes. Not that Gregory describes it in those terms: for him, Guntram, son of Lothar and grandson of Clovis, is the rightful overlord of the Bretons, so this is a wicked act of rebellion. He even gives the Breton rulers a speech admitting this explicitly to Guntram's envoys: "We, too, are well aware that these cities belong to the sons of King Lothar and we know that we should show allegiance to those princes."<sup>125</sup> It was, as said, a convention of Roman and Medieval historians to put speeches into the mouths of their characters, but these are meant to complement the action, not flatly contradict it. The sentiments Gregory here ascribes to the Bretons are so opposed to their actions the speech reads like a joke.

Of the six remaining references, five concern sixth-century events of very unequal political significance. Two relate to a Breton ascetic in Tours, who witnessed one of St. Martin's miracles but later turned to drink and died insane. Another concerns the defeat and death in Brittany of a Frankish prince, along with his entire family and his

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<sup>122</sup> To fully appreciate the intention behind this slander it is necessary to know that: "A union of a free woman with a male slave was treated as analogous to bestiality from the era of Roman law to that of the barbarian law-codes." Susan Mosher Stuard, *Ancillary evidence for the decline of medieval slavery*, Past & Present, Nov, 1995 [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2279/is\\_n149/ai\\_17782416/print](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2279/is_n149/ai_17782416/print)

<sup>123</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.31

<sup>124</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VI, 4.29

<sup>125</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, XI.18

unfortunate Breton ally, in consequence of his wicked revolt against his father King Lothar. Two more give a potted biography of Waroch's father Macliaw.

Gregory does not give dates, but he does provide a chronological fix here. The story of Macliaw, in book 4, opens with the elevation of Baudinus to the bishopric of Tours and closes with his death, which tells us that the following events occurred between 546 and 552 AD. A Breton count named Chanao (Conan) killed three of his brothers and would have killed the fourth, Macliaw (Macliiau, Macliavus) had he not been rescued, first by Felix, bishop of Nantes (from 548 to 582 AD), then by Chonomor (Conomorus, also known as Marcus, who appears in Arthurian legend as King Mark, the uncle of Tristan). Macliaw was then tonsured and became bishop of Vannes, but on the death of his brother<sup>126</sup> he returned to secular life, and to his wife, and took over his brother's kingdom. For this he was excommunicated by his fellow bishops, according to Gregory, though he does not state at which church council this occurred. He does, however, promise to tell us later how this sinner met a violent end.

The second part of the story is in book 5, it's position suggesting a date of around 577 AD. Gregory tells us that Macliaw and another Breton chieftain, Bodic (Budic) swore an oath to each other that whichever outlived the other would take care of the dead man's son. But when Bodic died Macliaw instead took over his kingdom and forced his son Theuderic (Theodoric) into exile. Eventually Theuderic returned, slew Macliaw and his son Jacob, and took back Bodic's kingdom. Waroch succeeded his father, and proceeded to be a thorn in the side of Good King Guntram.

There is only one earlier mention of the continental British in Gregory's history, his one line reference in book 2 to the destruction of Riothamus' forces in Leo's failed crusade against the Goths. For the whole period of Clovis' rule there is nothing at all recorded in Gregory's history apart from this:

... for from the death of King Clovis onwards the Bretons remained under the domination of the Franks and their rulers were called counts and not kings.

This statement is inserted within Gregory's story of Macliaw, immediately after his account of how Chonomor hid Macliaw in a tomb and told Chanao's assassins he was dead, and Chanao, receiving this report, "took over the entire kingdom". Thus the statement stands outside the chronology of the history and looks like a later interpolation. It could still be from Gregory's own pen, as it is known he revised his own history. But whoever wrote it, it clearly isn't true. Brittany was not under the dominion of the Franks when Waroch fought Guntram for possession of Rennes and Nantes, nor when Macliavus and Budic, Conan and Conomorus, settled their territorial and succession disputes among themselves without reference to Frankish opinion. Nor when bishop Regalis of Vannes exculpated himself, his clergy and his townsfolk of disloyal conduct towards the Frankish rulers, stating on oath that "we have to do as the Bretons tell us, and this irks us very much."<sup>127</sup>

The descendants of Clovis were the rightful overlords of Brittany, according to

<sup>126</sup> If Lewis Thorpe is correct, and the Breton ally is Conan, then the year is 560 AD.

<sup>127</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, X.9

Gregory of Tours and his Church, and the Frankish kings continued to advance that claim throughout the middle ages, but beyond an occasional temporary success they were unable to enforce it. Breton independence was never crushed by force, the two countries were eventually united by marriage. In 1488 the Breton heiress, Duchess Anne, wed Louis XII, but it was not until after her death that the independent Duchy was incorporated into the kingdom of France, in 1532 - more than a thousand years after the death of King Clovis.

As there is no record, in Gregory's history or elsewhere, of any battle fought between the Bretons and the first Christian king of the Franks, one might be tempted to assume that Gregory, or his interpolator, invented Clovis' conquest of Brittany, except that there is contemporary evidence to the contrary. There is the letter from three Gallo-Roman bishops Licinius of Tours, Melanius of Rennes, and Eustochius of Angers, to two Breton priests, Lovocatus and Cathernus, regarding the alien British custom of carrying portable alters around to the huts of their countrymen and allowing females to "hold the chalices" during the celebration of the Eucharist. The two priests are instructed to mend their ways immediately on receiving this letter, otherwise the three bishops will "come to you with the Apostolic rod, if you deny charity, and hand you over to Satan in the death of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved". But who was going to enforce this death sentence? All three of these bishops attended the Council of Orléans in 511, hence the letter is conventionally dated to that year.<sup>128</sup> This council was called by Clovis. These are Clovis' men. Clearly the power of the first Christian king of the Franks did at that time extend beyond the walled Gallo-Roman towns of Rennes, Nantes and Vannes, all the way out to the huts of the Bretons in the countryside.

So when did Clovis conquer Brittany? It might seem that after Vouillé he was kept rather busy eliminating his Frankish rivals, if Gregory's chronology is to be credited. But historians don't credit it. Would Clovis really have waited twenty years to punish Chararic, who didn't support him against Syagrius, or to eliminate Ragnachar, who did? Certainly Sigibert the Lamé and his son Chloderic must have been dealt with after Vouillé, since Chloderic fought with Clovis at that battle. Presumably the old warrior was not an easy victim, hence Clovis' use of the son to eliminate the father. And it was Clovis' envoys who murdered Chloderic, so Gregory tells us, which means that these murders in the Frankish heartland do not necessarily require Clovis' presence there.

After Vouillé, according to Gregory, Clovis wintered in Bordeaux. He removed all Alaric's treasure from Toulouse and went to Angoulême where the walls fell down before him. Then he went to Tours where he received the consulship from Emperor Anastasius. This happened during the episcopate of Licinius. In book 10 Gregory gives us a complete list of all the bishops of Tours up to himself, the nineteenth, with a few biographical details. The two bishops who preceded Licinius, Volusianus and Verus, were both exiled by the Goths on suspicion of desiring to subject their territories to the Franks. Which is to say, before the episcopate of Licinius, Tours was

<sup>128</sup> along with, interestingly, Quintianus of Rodez; see *Gallic Councils 511-680* on Gallia et Frankia, An Online Encyclopedia of Late Antique Gaul, <http://spectrum.troy.edu/~ajones/concilia.htm>

held by the Goths. And Licinius' episcopate is usually held to have begun in 508. Could Clovis have conquered Brittany before taking Tours? It seems unlikely.

The administrative divisions of the Roman church followed those of the state, and Tours was the metropolitan see for Lugdunensis Tertia, which included the whole of what became Brittany. Clovis came here in 508, bringing with him spoils of war as a thank-offering to St. Martin. In the same year, at Christmas, he was baptised into the Catholic Church, according to recent scholarship.<sup>129</sup> Three years later he convoked the council of Orléans. Thirty two bishops attended, including Melanius of Rennes, Modestus of Vannes and Litardus of Saint-Pol-de-Léon. None of these Breton sees are represented at any subsequent Gallic council until the middle of the century. It was at the first council of Orléans, in 511, that the decision was taken to bring the Christian British in Gaul into line with normal Roman practice, if necessary by force. In that same year, or the following, Clovis died.

Gregory concludes his second book with an account of Clovis' end. He died in Paris after a reign of thirty years when he was forty five years old, and was buried there in the church of the Holy Apostles which he and his queen Clothild had built. But Gregory does not tell us what Clovis died of. His wording suggests the end of a full life; the Latin is *His ita transactis* which is variously translated as "After all this" or "At long last", but **at forty five he didn't die of old age. Something killed him. Gregory doesn't say what.**

To put this silence in context: Clovis was succeeded by his four sons, and Gregory tells us what each of them died of; Chlodomer in battle against the Burgundians, the other three of illness, Childebert after lying bedridden in Paris for some time. Gregory records the cause of death for all of Clovis' grandsons and great-grandsons who ruled over the Franks after them, and of a few who didn't: one died in battle, four died of illness, seven were murdered, there was one assisted suicide and one died of excommunication having married the wrong woman, who also died. That's eighteen descendants of Clovis accounted for. Clovis himself is the first king of the Franks of whom Gregory has any detail to report. He is Gregory's hero. But Gregory does not tell us what he died of, only where, and when. After his death Queen Clothild went to Tours, Gregory says, where, apart from an occasional visit to Paris, she lived out the rest of her days serving as a religious in the church of St. Martin. But we know she didn't. And so does Gregory.

In book 3 we find Queen Clothild living in Paris, where she is raising her orphaned grandchildren, the three young sons of Chlodomer. It is there that the elder two are murdered by their uncles, jealous of the attention she lavishes upon them and fearing the implications for their own positions.<sup>130</sup> Nobody raises three children during brief visits. In addition, Fabio Barbieri points out that none of the four churches founded by Clothild is anywhere near Tours: "One does not build four large churches during the intervals of "rare" visits; nor, if one has such a passion for church building, does one omit to build any in one's supposed place of permanent residence, especially when

<sup>129</sup> Danuta Shanzer (1998) Dating the baptism of Clovis: the bishop of Vienne vs the bishop of Tours, in *Early Medieval Europe* Volume 7 Issue 1 Page 29-57, March 1998.

<sup>130</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.18

the memories of one of Gaul's greatest saints are there to be honoured. At the same time, Iniuriosus (bishop of Tours from 529 to 546) built one church, rebuilt another, and reorganised worship in the cathedral; would Chlothilde not at least have taken part in these pious activities, if she had been anywhere near Tours?"<sup>131</sup> It's a fair question.

Clothild died in Tours, according to Gregory, during the episcopate of Iniuriosus, "full of days and rich in good works". But she was not buried there. The royal corpse was carried back to Paris, "with a great singing of psalms".<sup>132</sup> She was buried beside her husband King Clovis in the church of St. Peter's, which she herself had built.

So what do we really learn from the final chapter of Gregory's second book? Clovis died in 511 or 12, we don't know what of, and he was buried in Paris. His newly widowed queen made a trip to Tours, we don't know why, but clearly not for the reasons Gregory gives.

Then in book 4 we are told that after the death of Clovis the Bretons were under the dominion of the Franks. Not after any particular battle: no battles are mentioned. Nor are we given the name of any British leader who fought against Clovis. We get no details at all from Gregory, who prefers not to mention Clovis' defeats.

We learn nothing from any other reputable source. **No Roman or German historical work has anything to tell us of how Brittany was won by the Franks before 511 and lost again before 546.** There are continental British sources, but these suffer from the same deficiencies as the insular British sources for the sixth century: they are not contemporary, they are contaminated with legend, and they are far from being respectable. For the most part, indeed, they are saints' *Lives*. There is one, the *Life of St. Goeznovius* (the Breton form of Gwyddno), which has a preface claiming that Arthur fought on the continent, as follows:

The usurping king Vortigern, to buttress the defence of the kingdom of Great Britain which he unrighteously held, summoned warlike men from the land of Saxony and made them his allies in the kingdom. Since they were pagans and of devilish character, lusting by their nature to shed human blood, they drew many evils upon the Britons.

Presently their pride was checked for a while through the great Arthur, king of the Britons. They were largely cleared from the island and reduced to subjection. But when this same Arthur, after many victories which he won gloriously in Britain and in Gaul, was summoned at last from human activity, the way was open for the Saxons to go again into the island.

This preface contains a claim that it was written in 1019. If so, we would have independent written testimony to Arthur's continental wars. But the claim is disputed. The preface may, after all, have been written after, and influenced by, Geoffrey of Monmouth's historical fantasy, with its incredible tale of a vast Arthurian empire -

<sup>131</sup> Fabio P Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407 - 597*, Chapter 8.6

<sup>132</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, IV.1



which Geoffrey never intended his readers to credit. Geoffrey does not ask us to believe him. He asks us to look more closely at the history preserved and promoted by his opponents, the enemies of his race. He invites us to observe that the written history of the monk reformers is no sort of evidence against the British tradition of Mighty Arthur, Hammer of the Saxons. With reference to Arthur's continental wars he directs us in particular to Gregory of Tours, to the period between 470 and 542, dates which, interestingly, coincide almost exactly with the first and second mentions of the British in Gregory's history. Which is to say, Geoffrey directs readers to observe that between book II.18, the fall of Riothamus, whom Gregory does not name, and book VI.4, the rise of Conan, who appears out of nowhere, Gregory has nothing whatever to say about the Britons on the continent.

Geoffrey invented nothing. When he makes his Arthur cross over into Gaul, his entire contemporary readership would have known where he got this story from. And we know, because the facts are still preserved in the written record. "Go to the realm of Armorica, which is lesser-Britain, and preach about the market place and villages that Arthur the Briton is dead as other men" Alain de Lille warns his readers, "Hardly will you escape unscathed, without being whelmed by the curses or crushed by the stones of your hearers."<sup>133</sup> This is the same Arthur who defeated the Saxons at Badon, who could not have died at Camlann, whom the entire population of Brittany insisted had rescued them from foreign oppression.

History is not simply a synthesis of the surviving written evidence. It is also an explanation of how we got to where we are now. Brittany exists. This Celtic realm in Gaul did not survive by default. The Empire granted Clovis title to the whole of Gaul, but at this formative period in the history of Europe, when so many new nations came into being, he failed to make good that claim.

The imperial recovery at the time of Anastasius was only a partial success. Clovis overwhelmed the Gallo-Roman kingdom of Syagrius and drove the Visigoths out of Aquitaine. But his advance south was checked by Theodoric the Great, the Arian king of the Ostrogoths, the uncrowned western emperor. And in the north he was checked by the victor of Badon, the heir of Maximus and Vortigern, defender of the native Pelagian Church, the rex rebellis, the tyrant Arthur, Britain's Heretic Emperor.

The history of the defeated is forfeit. A century after Badon Arthur's achievement was reversed. In 597 AD St. Augustine of Canterbury arrived in Britain. He was sent by Pope Gregory the Great with instructions to convert the pagan English to the religion of the Empire and assume authority over the entire British Church. The pope had carefully chosen his time, and his ally - he had sent Augustine to the court of King Aethelbert, hereditary ruler of the first British kingdom lost to the invader, whose dominion then extended over much of southern Britain and who was married to Clovis' great-granddaughter. After two centuries of absence, Rome had returned.

These two centuries, the period of British independence, John Morris termed the Age of Arthur, arguing that though the British emperor himself remained unknowable,

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<sup>133</sup> Alain de Lille, *Prophetia Anglicana*, see E K Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, p110

his achievement was apparent: "His name overshadows his age" "He straddles two centuries, and names them as fitly as Charles the Great names the eighth and ninth centuries in Europe."<sup>134</sup> His opponents, in response, declared that Arthur was a non-person who could not be considered to have had any role in history since no contemporary document names him. This is disingenuous. Arthur is not missing from this record, it is the record itself which is missing. Only one British document which could have named Arthur survives from the fifth and sixth centuries, a virulently anti-British text which, according to David Dumville, received a great deal of scholarly attention in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries among the English, and especially at Canterbury.

Morris terms Arthur a mighty shadow. I think we might better describe him as a silhouette, a shape deliberately cut from our picture of British history, a long silence imposed on the story of our past. But that silence remains eloquent. That shape still testifies to Arthur's vast historical importance, not only to the Britons but to their long-time adversaries. These two whole centuries that the winners sought to erase from British history should properly be named the Age of Arthur.

Heretic Emperor: The Lost History of King Arthur  
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<sup>134</sup> <sup>134</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, ppxiii & xvi

## Postscript

*The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*

Milan Kundera, 1978<sup>135</sup>

The philosopher Hegel famously stated that that the only thing one learns from history is that nobody learns anything from history. One would hope that historians, at least, would prove an exception to this rule. However, history does provide one or two lessons in historiography that the Dark Age historians clearly haven't absorbed.

Individuals have been erased from public record. In the Roman period this process was so commonplace that we have a name for it, *damnatio memoriae*. Enemies of the state - that is to say, those on the losing side - were regularly condemned to this process of posthumous iconographic desecration which saw public commemoration of the reprobate publicly obliterated, his name removed from monuments, his statues smashed, even coins bearing his image melted down. The effects of this punishment remain visible to this day. There is, for example, a marble inscription in the British museum with a line chiselled out. The missing element has been confidently restored - the names of Emperor Geta and his wife, excised on the orders of Geta's brother and one-time co-Emperor, Caracalla.

Geta was only one of the Roman Emperors known to have suffered *damnatio memoriae*. A classic work on inscriptions<sup>136</sup> supplies a list of thirty six, beginning with Caligula and ending with Magnus Maximus. Clearly the memory of these individuals was not erased, or we would not be able to name them. But, Charles Hedrick argues in *History and Silence*, this was never really the intention. If it had been, inscriptions, for example, would have been recarved, rather than left with a conspicuous erasure which invites the reader to fill in the blank. So it was not obliteration of their enemies' names that the victors sought, but their conspicuous public dishonouring: "As the erasure marks a silence, it also functions as a reminder of what is not said: it tells the reader to remember to forget".<sup>137</sup>

Magnus Maximus, the Macsen Wledig of British legend, is the final name in Sandys list but by no means the last individual to suffer this fate. We have a very clear example from the sixth century in Ravenna, in a church now known as Sant'Apollinare Nuovo. This was originally the palace church of Theodoric the Great, emperor of the west in all but name. After the Byzantine conquest of Italy it was transferred from Arian to Catholic ownership - the legal term was *reconciliatio* - then ritually cleansed and rededicated, and renamed for St. Martin, the soldier saint of Gaul. But this process of deArianification involved more than ritual. The mosaics which decorate the interior of

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<sup>135</sup> Milan Kundera *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

<sup>136</sup> Sir John Edwin Sandys, *Latin Epigraphy*, 1927 see

<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/romannames1/a/EmperorsErased.htm>

<sup>137</sup> Charles Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity*, University of Texas Press, 1 Jun 2000, p124.

the church were also extensively altered. This has been proved by chemical analysis of the mortar which holds the tiles in place, as well as by the arrangement of the tiles themselves. But in part it was always visible to the naked eye, and this has to be deliberate.

One mosaic depicts a building labelled Palatium, an arrangement of stylised white columns and arches against a gold background, and between each arch a knotted curtain. But these curtains are a later addition, for against the pillars can clearly be seen the hands of earlier figures who once stood framed in the archways. There can be little doubt who was once here depicted - the Arian notables of Theodoric's court. As Arthur Urbano remarks, "Given the extent of the modifications executed ... it would appear that these hands, which could have easily been replaced with white tiles, were left intentionally, a subtle reminder of the purgation and charge to 'remember to forget.'"<sup>138</sup>

What has this to do with King Arthur? The victor of Badon and the Gothic King of Italy were contemporaries, but Theodoric's period is Late Roman, while the British ruler whose efforts rescued one corner of the western world from German rule lived in the depths of the British Dark Ages, in a territory which had been outside the Roman Empire for almost a century. However, we have evidence that the Roman custom of *damnatio memoriae* did not end with Rome's departure but was still practised in Britain three centuries later.

Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, written in 731, is our source for dating the last gasp of British dominion over Britain to just a century previously. Bede relates in detail the tragic events of the year 633: the death in battle of mighty Edwin of Northumbria on 12th October, the golden age of his rule brought to an end by the wicked rebellion of the British king Caedwalla; the dissolution of his kingdom back into its constituent parts of Deira and Bernicia, whose two kings then reverted to paganism; their subsequent deaths, the one fighting Caedwalla, the other attempting to come to terms; the horror of Caedwalla's rule and his ethnic cleansing of the English from northern Britain, and finally the British tyrant's death at the hands of King Oswald. In consequence of these events, Bede tells us, a decision was made by those calculating the reigns of kings to rewrite history and to add this year to Oswald's reign, as if he had succeeded his uncle Edwin without a break, as if Northumbria had remained whole and Christian, as if the British interlude had never happened. Bede tells us all about it. He doesn't tell us much about the tyrant Caedwalla: he is a man without position or ancestry in Bede's history and it is only from British sources that we learn Edwin's nemesis was king of Gwynedd and great-great-grandson to Gildas' Maglocunus, Dragon of the Island. Indeed Caedwalla plays no role at all in Bede's history except for that fatal year, the year of English apostasy and British triumph which, Bede tells us, "all good men"<sup>139</sup> had agreed to strike from the record. Yet Bede records it. He is pointing up the erasure: we are reminded to forget.

There is a gap in the British written record between the expulsion of the Romans, at

<sup>138</sup> Arthur Urbano, *Donation, Dedication, and Damnatio Memoriae: The Catholic Reconciliation of Ravenna and the Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo*, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13.1 (2005) p98

<sup>139</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, III.2.

which time literate Britons were writing theological tracts in flawless Latin, and the arrival of the Roman mission to the English, when St. Augustine's claim to authority over the British Church was rejected by "seven British bishops, and many very learned men"<sup>140</sup> Is this not obviously an erasure? If "all good men" could get together and agree to remove the British recovery of 633 from the historical record, then in principle a more significant British victory, and a far longer period of British dominion, could have been excised in just the same way, by an agreement among "all good men". It would, of course, be necessary for these 'good men', i.e. the Roman faction, to gain control of the British written record - which they surely did, as the Celtic Church was 'reconciled' to the Roman in the early middle ages along with its personnel, its buildings and its manuscripts, and the Roman Church then famously enjoyed a Europe-wide monopoly in literacy up to the twelfth-century renaissance. Admittedly erasing two centuries from a nation's history is rather a different proposition from erasing a single year, but the difference is one of size and complexity, not of kind.

A dearth of contemporary documents is not the same thing as a lack of evidence. According to John Morris, the historical evidence for fifth- and sixth- century Britain was actually abundant, but it was complex and had not received systematic study, despite the vital importance of this period for any understanding of subsequent British history. The name itself was partly responsible for this neglect: the term Dark Ages was originally coined to designate all the 'gothic' centuries between the fall of Rome and the Enlightenment and to dismiss them as a dismal regression from the elegant splendour of Rome. Better terms had since been found: the term Middle Ages first rescued the later centuries from obscurity and contempt, then the earlier part was renamed Merovingian and Carolingian - but only on the Continent. The term Dark Ages has remained as the designation for this seminal period in British history, when all the nations of this island came into being. The term, and its later variant sub-Roman, still convey a political judgement, and continue to cloud understanding and hamper study: "The debt that modern men owe to the energy of their remote ancestors is easily hidden behind foggy language."<sup>141</sup> Morris proposed that the normal historical convention which allots neutral distinctive names to defined periods should also be applied in this case; it should be named for its most powerful ruler, the Arthurian period, the Age of Arthur.

This suggested new terminology was vehemently rejected, and Morris reputation trashed, by professional historians who had no problem whatever with the old terminology. The Dark Ages, they attest, are not dark due to lack of study, they are dark of their very nature. As David Dumville asserts in *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, and many of his persuasion have since reiterated, this is an obscure period whose political history cannot be written because there is no contemporary written record from which to derive it. But why is there no record? Well, that's because this is a Dark Age. When Roman rule ended Britain suffered a political and economic collapse, and in consequence her intellectual culture disintegrated and her history went

<sup>140</sup> Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, II.1.

<sup>141</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p507

unrecorded. But how do we know this, if we have no written record from which to write the history of this period? Because one document has survived, just one, which eloquently testifies to this tragedy: Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*.

Gildas does indeed tell us that this was the fate of post-Roman Britain. The British, left to themselves, proved incapable of creating a stable government, kings were anointed and then slain so that others more wicked might reign in their place. Without Rome's protection and guidance the natives could not organise their own defence, and were preyed on by savage nations from overseas. Then famine and plague devastated the island, leaving a desperate remnant of the population dependent on hunting and scavenging for survival. Many fled abroad as refugees, and these took with them all the island's remaining books that had survived burning by the enemy. And this left Gildas, as he himself explains, in the difficult position of having no native sources from which to compile the history of Roman and post-Roman Britain with which he prefaces his attack on his sinful countrymen.

Gildas' history of Roman Britain is complete nonsense, and no historian of that period would dream of treating his account as a valid witness. Yet the Dark Age historians accept Gildas as a totally reliable witness for Britain's post-Roman collapse. Gildas historical errors, in their interpretation, only serve to prove the truth of his account, as they demonstrate how total was his ignorance of that earlier period, an ignorance which he must have shared with all of his contemporaries. As E A Thompson explains: "The most frightening feature in the picture drawn by Gildas is ... the destruction of knowledge itself. Knowledge of the outside world and knowledge of the past had been wiped out of men's minds."<sup>142</sup>

But knowledge itself was not wiped out of men's minds in fifth- and sixth-century Britain. Literacy survived. It's just that we have no written British history earlier than the ninth century. It would be surprising indeed if the literate British entered their dark period of isolation composing theological treatise in elegant Latin and returned, centuries later, to communion with the wider, Roman world literate in both Latin and Greek, but in between had lapsed into illiteracy. We know they had not. The proof is that underutilised historical source, Dark Age British stone inscriptions, and some of these have been shown to contain complicated ciphers and mathematical puzzles.<sup>143</sup> But for all their cleverness, these literate Britons left us with no written account of their history. So, is there an element of truth in the Dark Age historians' Gildasian nightmare? If not knowledge itself, was knowledge of the past wiped from the minds of the Dark Age Britons?

An essential element of the Dark Age historians' perspective is that the British themselves were responsible for the two hundred year gap in British history: "Men's knowledge of their history, their own history, had evaporated."<sup>144</sup> But as E A Thompson is perfectly aware it wasn't only the natives who failed to leave a record of this period of British Independence.

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<sup>142</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p115

<sup>143</sup> By David Howlett in, for example, *Cambro-Latin Compositions: Their Competence and Craftmanship*, Dublin 1998, also by Charles Thomas in *Whispering Reeds*, Oxford 2002

<sup>144</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p114

Thompson made this remark at the end of his study of Constantius of Lyon's *Life of St. Germanus* and in that same work he observed how remarkably little this writer has to tell us about Britain, in his own day or in the time of his saintly hero. Constantius, writing between 480 and 494, tells us St. Germanus made two visits to Britain for the purpose of combating the Pelagian heresy, enjoying a resounding success on both occasions, so much so that, at the time of his writing, the island remained completely orthodox. But though he claims Germanus was invited to intervene in the island's affairs by Britain's bishops, he does not name a single one of these and they play no subsequent part in the story. The only lay rulers with whom the saint has any involvement are those two whose offspring he cured by his miraculous power, one on each visit. Yet Constantius does elaborate on the saint's political involvement with named and historically attested characters in Italy and Gaul, so it is not simply that the biographer thinks these matters irrelevant. Rather, Thompson explains, while there were plenty of informants to fill in the details of Germanus' adventures in Gaul and Italy, Constantius could find no-one with any knowledge whatever of British affairs half a century previously. As for Constantius' mistaken view that Britain remained completely orthodox, at a time when E A Thompson assumes the Dark Age collapse had wiped out Christianity in Britain, this is due, Thompson opines, to Constantius' complete ignorance of Britain's lamentable situation in his own day, an ignorance which he shared with all of his Gallic contemporaries: "communications had long since been broken off to an extent which made it all but impossible for the general public of educated men in Gaul to learn what exactly was going on there."<sup>145</sup> Yet in this same period pottery from the eastern Mediterranean, in volume, was somehow making its way to Tintagel in Cornwall.

A century later another Gallic writer displays the same selective ignorance on British affairs. Gregory of Tours leaves a gap of seventy years between his first and second mentions of the British in Gaul, and thus avoids relating how his hero Clovis failed to extend Frankish dominion into what is now Brittany. As Fabio Barbieri remarks, Gregory "has left enough space in the history of Gaul before 544 to accommodate a whole epic of Arthur or of any other conqueror".<sup>146</sup> His references to insular Britain are even briefer: in book 1 the tyrant Maximus, having subdued the Britons, was made Emperor by his soldiers, and in book 4, and then again in book 9, a daughter of King Charibert married "a man from Kent", "the son of a King of Kent".<sup>147</sup> And that's all. But the tyrant Maximus was the patron of St. Martin of Tours, Gregory's favourite saint, and Queen Bertha, Aethelbert of Kent's Frankish wife, was the daughter of Queen Ingoberg, a personal acquaintance of Gregory's: he tells us he attended her deathbed to record her bequests. We might have expected him to say more. But then, as Barbieri points out, Gregory is peculiarly silent on matters even closer to home. In book 3, apart from his patently untrue claim that Queen Clothild spent her widowhood in Tours, he has almost nothing to say about events in this, his own diocese. Barbieri concludes, from this and other evidence, "that between at least 528 and probably 543

<sup>145</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p85

<sup>146</sup> Fabio P Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407 - 597*, Chapter 8.6

<sup>147</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, I.43, IV.25, IX.25

the British held Tours".<sup>148</sup> And certainly we can't assume that Gregory's silence indicates any difficulty on the part of educated men in Gaul to work out what exactly was going on among the British, in Brittany or in Britain, at the time of his writing. Cross-channel communications had not been broken off, the royal Kentish marriage is sufficient proof of that.

And then there's Bede. A skilled historian and resourceful researcher, Bede, from his home in northern Britain, drew on sources as remote as the papal archives in creating his history. His account of fifth-century Britain is based on Gildas, but supplemented with more reliable information from Continental sources. But sixth-century Britain is simply missing from his history. It is impossible to claim that Bede's silence is due to his complete ignorance of sixth-century British affairs, an ignorance which he shared with all of his educated contemporaries, since we know Bede had at least one sixth-century source - Gildas. He could have used Gildas' testimony to shed some light on the shocking events of 633. He did not, because he chose not to.

It is interesting to compare the respect accorded E A Thompson's ludicrous notion with the contempt heaped upon John Morris' perfectly reasonable suggestion that the standard techniques of source criticism might expand the textual evidence for the Arthurian period. Morris argued that the literate British had produced a written record during their period of dominance, but this record was not passed down the centuries because the monks whose profession it was to preserve documents by copying them did not consider these to be of sufficient interest or relevance. However, some of these lost documents had been utilised as source texts by later writers, so that fragmentary information from the fifth and sixth centuries could be found buried in later works, and its witness recovered. David Dumville contemptuously dismissed this argument with the accusation that Morris had "failed to appreciate the nature"<sup>149</sup> of the Celtic texts he had utilised. The same David Dumville wrote a glowing forward to E A Thompson's *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, approving his "ferocious attack" on the opinions of other scholars and wondering admiringly "where the author will strike next".<sup>150</sup> No Dark Age historian has been rude enough to point out that Thompson, with his notion of spontaneous collective amnesia, had failed to appreciate the nature of the human mind.

By granting Arthur not only an historic but an historically important role, David Dumville claims John Morris had given us "what is in all essentials a medieval view of the period."<sup>151</sup> What he intends by this is to associate Morris' history with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and thus with the concept of a history concocted out of legend - **Geoffrey was once dismissed as a fraudulent historian on the grounds that he had fooled his credulous, pre-enlightened readership into believing the legendary Arthur an historical character. But study of Geoffrey's text, and of contemporary reaction to it, has moved on considerably from this view.** So why raise

<sup>148</sup> Fabio P Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407 - 597*, Chapter 8.6

<sup>149</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p174

<sup>150</sup> David Dumville, Girton College, Cambridge, September 1983, in E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, pviii

<sup>151</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, p192



that old chestnut? Because dismissing Arthur from history is only half the battle, we still have to account for the Arthur of British tradition. If there never was an historical Arthur then someone must have invented him. That someone cannot have been Geoffrey of Monmouth, because Arthur's historical role was well attested before he wrote. Indeed the earliest 'securely dated' reference to an historical Arthur predates Geoffrey by centuries. The *Historia Brittonum*, written around 825 AD, makes Arthur the leader of the British resistance to the Saxon invasion and lists twelve battles fought by him, the last being Badon. So, Richard Barber argues, this earliest surviving reference must also be the first ever written: The historical Arthur was invented by a Welshman in the ninth century.

Every writer has a motive, and there is a reason for every forgery. This new British hero, Barber suggests, was created to serve the needs of a new Welsh dynasty in a new era. The ninth century was a watershed in Welsh history. For centuries isolated from the European mainstream by her dissident Easter, the Welsh Church was now reconciled to Roman usage and the Welsh princes might hope to play a part on a wider stage. As the ruling houses of Powys and Gwynedd died out in the male line a new dynasty arose in Gwynedd and came to dominate the whole of Wales. With Mercian power visibly weakening a push to the east, the recovery of lands lost to the English, now appeared possible. All wars require propaganda justification, and thus, in Barber's theory, Arthurian history was created, to bolster the claims and serve the ambitions of the ninth-century rulers of Gwynedd.

This historical fabrication was peculiarly limited but extraordinary powerful. Strangely, its creator made no attempt to link Arthur, genealogically or geographically, with the parvenu dynasty he was intended to serve. All that the *Historia* relates of the new hero's earthy career is contained in a single paragraph. **The denigration of Vortigern occupies about fifteen times as much space in the same text. Yet from such unpromising beginnings, we are invited to believe, the legend of Mighty Arthur arose and from its origin in northern Welsh court circles spread to all the British races further south - right down to Brittany across the channel - and percolated down to all classes.** By the twelfth century this artificial, literary hero was revered by all the British races, the most tenderly loved and bitterly defended character in all their historical tradition, the foundation on which their entire historical framework rested: Arthur had once led them to victory against the invader and he would return to lead them again. This hope inspired the Welsh revolt which erupted on the death of Henry I: They would have it all back, by means of Arthur, they would call it Britain again. To deny that hope in any village or market place in Brittany was to risk a lynching, Alain de Lille tells us. And we know he wasn't exaggerating. In 1113 a group of canons from Laon, on a fund-raising tour with their miracle-working relics of Our Lady, visited Cornwall, where they attempted to enlighten the natives on the matter of Arthur's mortality. They caused a riot.<sup>152</sup>

To the Dark Age historians, this Celtic belief in Arthur's second coming is further proof that he never existed in the first place. Since fantastic tales are told of Arthur, he

<sup>152</sup> The story was written up in 1145 by Hermann de Tournai, and is reprinted in E K Chambers' *Arthur of Britain*

must have been a fantasy from the outset. But once we accept this theory of a fabricated Arthur we are forced to ask ourselves about the process of transmission, with all the further questions and critical judgements which that implies. For example, how did a literary figure created in North Wales come to dominate the historical consciousness of illiterate Breton peasants?

We could add a few postulates to the theory, in hopes to help it stand up. Perhaps the Breton historical Arthur was invented independently of the North Welsh historical Arthur, by an entirely unknown writer working from the same raw material as pseudo-Nennius. We could suggest a bear god common to both regions whose mythological adventures were relocated to the historical past, fighting the Saxons in the one case, and fighting on the Continent in the other.<sup>153</sup> But that would create more, and quite unreal, problems than it solves. The evidence for the British deity Arthur is precisely the same as the evidence for the man - minus Gildas' account of Badon. If on the basis of that evidence we must exclude the one from consideration - we must reject him from our histories, he has already wasted too much of the historian's time - how can we, on the same basis, admit the other into the debate? And can we really credit that two writers would independently settle on the same mythological character, or even just the same name, on which to hang two separate invented histories? The odds must be astronomical. Besides, the need to invent a false history presupposes, in both cases, the lack of a genuine history, and thus a convenient gap to accommodate the fake. In the case of insular Britain we have, in the view of the Dark Age historians, the evidence of Gildas, whose historical errors demonstrate that knowledge of the past had been wiped from men's minds. Indeed Gildas himself does state specifically that the island's literary heritage had been lost - it was taken overseas, he claims, by those Britons who fled into exile. Which is to say that if we assume the cultural collapse that engulfed the insular British also extended to the British colonies overseas, we do not do so on the basis of Gildas' evidence, or indeed on the basis of any evidence at all, as far as I can see.

At the root of this farrago is an error of identification: the Dark Age historians are assuming a gap in the written record is the same thing as a hiatus in historical memory. No illiterate Breton peasant would have made that mistake.

When Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his brilliant, much-maligned *History of the Kings of Britain* there were two versions of fifth- and sixth-century British history known to his contemporaries. On the one hand there was a British version, the story of Arthur, which, as Geoffrey reminds us in his opening paragraph, was joyfully handed down in oral tradition that was just as reliable as a book. On the other hand, there was a written record which contained no mention of Arthur but which, as Geoffrey goes on to demonstrate at length, could offer no evidence against him, and left plenty of room to accommodate him. That record was preserved and promoted by the Britons' political and military opponents, a fact which Geoffrey skilfully underlines. This was no mere academic argument; at the time Geoffrey wrote 'Latin Christendom' was waging war against the Celtic races, who for the purposes of conquest and colonisation were

<sup>153</sup> see N J Higham, *King Arthur: Mythmaking and History*, London 2002, also Thomas Green, *The History and Historicisation of Arthur*

placed exactly on a par with Muslims and pagans. Britain's Christian history, or lack of it, was a highly charged political issue at the time when Arthur, Christian champion against pagan Saxon invaders, gained such sudden and widespread popularity in Europe - thanks in no small part to Geoffrey's book. The Dark Age historians apparently haven't noticed this.

But then, historians specialise. Historians studying fifth- and sixth-century Britain cannot be expected to have a thorough grasp of how twelfth-century political and military affairs might impact a particular contemporary text. Geoffrey of Monmouth's sources, motives and technical terminology are matters outside their field of study. There is no good reason to presume that any Dark Age historian has even read his infamous history. But they have retained the use of his bad name as a stick with which to beat the Arthurians.

The Dark Age historians have not disproved the historical Arthur, they could not, as they themselves admit.<sup>154</sup> Instead, they sought to render the very concept disreputable, and so successful has their campaign been that merely to assist in preparing John Morris' notes for posthumous publication was perceived, by two perfectly reputable historians,<sup>155</sup> to be an academically risky act. William of Newburgh would have envied their triumph. He tried much the same trick on Geoffrey of Monmouth's posthumous reputation with, in his own day, considerably less success.

William's history of England from the Norman conquest to the reign of Richard the Lionheart - a keen Arthurian - is prefaced with an attack on Geoffrey, on Arthur and on the entire British people. It was, William asserts, either from a love of lying or from a desire to please his fellow Britons - the majority of whom are so stupid that they expect Arthur to return - that Geoffrey had sought to dignify with the name of authentic history a completely false account of what happened in Britain after the Romans voluntarily departed. He had concocted this tale out of the traditional fictions of the Britons conflated with some inventions of his own, but the true account of this period was still to be found in the honest histories of Bede and Gildas which plainly revealed that the Britons, left to their own devices, rapidly lost to the Saxons or Angles a land they were too cowardly and supine to defend. The view of this twelfth-century propagandist for the Papal reformation is in all essentials the view of today's Dark Age historians. But of course that doesn't mean their historiography has given us a medieval view of the period.

The assertion that historians must disregard the Britons' account of the fifth and sixth centuries, the period of their dominion, and accept only the writings of their Roman and English opponents as valid sources might seem, on the surface, to be simple racism. But as the original attack on John Morris illustrates, there is a little more to it than that. In *Sub-Roman Britain* David Dumville, having disparaged Morris' use of Celtic sources with the remark that he offered "only large doses of 'tradition' as the sweetener of this Celtic pill" goes on to assert that before historians grant any credence to 'tradition' they must first determine whose 'tradition' is in question and, in a remark which appears to have passed without comment, suggests three allowable

<sup>154</sup> see Thomas Green, , *The History and Historicisation of Arthur*

<sup>155</sup> Robert Browning and John McNeal Dodgson

categories: monastic, legal and craft tradition.<sup>156</sup> Are we to accept, then, that historians may utilise only those traditions whose provenance is exclusively masculine and elite?

"The historian" John Morris opined "must acknowledge his own sympathies as openly as a Tacitus or a Bede."<sup>157</sup> On that point at least the Dark Age historians are in complete agreement with him. The labels they have preferred to retain for this period 'The Dark Ages', and its modern variant 'sub-Roman', loudly proclaim where their own loyalties lie, and they do not lie with the native population of these islands. It was Imperial Rome which brought the Light of Civilisation to this benighted island on the edge of the known world, in the view of the Dark Age historians as in the view of Gildas, so it is only to be expected that Rome's withdrawal should have plunged the British natives back into darkness. But the evidence for this tragedy does not rest solely on documented history, or the lack of it. There is also the evidence of material culture, the remnants of which are so much more impressive and abundant for the Roman period than for sub-Roman. Of particular significance are those wonderful Roman villas, with marble columns and mosaic floors, which clearly nourished an intellectual life far superior to anything which could have been conducted in thatched huts. But if we are to 'believe the buildings' so to speak, we must surely include that remarkable construction, the Colosseum, and all lesser amphitheatres with which Imperial Rome gifted the provinces, in one of which, as late as the late fourth century AD, Augustine's close friend Alypius settled down comfortably to watch men torn apart for his entertainment.

Ceremonial sadism was a feature of the Roman Empire in its Christian period, just as in its pagan heyday. The public use of torture to terrorise the subject population was a necessary consequence of the massive social inequality which enabled the elite to build those impressive palaces. Pelagian heretics, who held that conversion to Christianity must entail actually following the teachings of Christ, were naturally appalled. The horror and revulsion of one of them has survived in the written record:

Under your very eyes the bodies of men, sharers of your own nature, are lashed with leaden scourges, broken with cudgels, crushed under the Claw, or burnt in the fires. And your holy eyes bear to watch this; you a Christian allow yourself to stare at this. And not to stare only, but in the role of oppressor to inflict the tortures of the executioner. To stare at it is horrible enough, but what can I say of him who orders it?

... But you, the upholder of wealth, trafficker in offices, after these cruelties you recline at ease, lolling on piled-up embroideries; you entertain your guests with the story, telling how you tortured and mangled the man, before the people, and with what manner of death you broke him and laid him low, as if you were a general celebrating his triumph; and in case anyone at your table should be horrified at the tale, you assert that you had to carry out the law, you who shortly

<sup>156</sup> David Dumville, *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend*, pp174 &192

<sup>157</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p xv

before were boasting that you lived according to Christ's law ...<sup>158</sup>

It is not difficult to understand why Rome's fifth-century upholders preferred Augustine's restructured Christianity to Pelagius' restatement of the obvious, and hereticised the latter. The Dark Age historians likewise don't have much sympathy for the Pelagians' principled stance. J N L Myres bewails the heresy's contribution to the fading of the Roman Light in Britain, complaining that it "bedevilled civilized thought among the Britons just at the time when unity was above all things essential for success in the struggle with Celtic barbarians and Germanic intruders alike."<sup>159</sup> E A Thompson, who credits Constantius' account of Germanus' resounding missionary success in Britain, declines to see any moral difference between the Pelagians and the Augustinians: "[W]e must feel neither joy nor sorrow that Pelagianism was defeated in Britain, as elsewhere ... It is not easy to feel any deep emotion when Tweedledum defeats Tweedledee."<sup>160</sup>

Thompson's opinion, however, is contradicted not only by the content of *De Divitiis*, but by its very survival. Only through the repeated attentions of copyists could a text of this era have come down to us, and this is one of over seventy Pelagian tracts to have survived the Roman *reconciliatio*, disguised under false attribution. *De Divitiis* was fathered on Pope St. Sixtus III, other tracts were attributed to St. Augustine and St. Jerome. The disguise is clearly as deliberate as the copying, and the responsibility for both lies with literate Celtic churchmen determined to preserve the "radical, individualist and humanist Christian tradition"<sup>161</sup> inherited from an earlier period, and nurtured in the region Arthur rescued from Roman rule.

It was in this dark age, in this obscure, neglected, transitional period in which all the nations of Britain have their origin, that the Celtic Church came into being. In John Morris' view, this was not the least effect of the British victory, for the Celtic Church went on to evangelise Europe, infusing ideas of personal and intellectual freedom into a culture decaying under the weight of Roman authoritarianism. Thus Arthur's rule was not rendered historically irrelevant by the eventual failure of the British state, as "the measure of any man lies not in his own lifetime, but in what he enables his successors to achieve."<sup>162</sup> By failing to give proper weight to this seminal period, Morris argued, our understanding of both British and European history was severely distorted. But if this period was to be properly studied it must have a proper name, as clear in meaning as Roman, Norman or Tudor. Morris proposed it be named for its most prominent ruler, the victor of Badon. This reasonable-sounding suggestion provoked outrage.

In one sense, the Dark Age historians are quite correct: The term 'Age of Arthur' cannot substitute for 'The Dark Ages'. The two name completely different histories of Britain, only one of which could actually have happened. Either there was a real,

<sup>158</sup> *De Divitiis* (On Wealth) Jack Lindsay, *Arthur and his Times*, p129

<sup>159</sup> J N L Myres, *The English Settlements*, p20

<sup>160</sup> E A Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*, p25

<sup>161</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p405

<sup>162</sup> John Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, p510

historical Arthur or the 'withdrawal' of Roman tax collectors and bureaucrats from an ex-province somehow caused its complete political and cultural collapse. Either Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* preserves an essential truth, that the fifth century British did succeed in establishing a viable polity outside the control and authority of the Roman Empire and its Church, or the British historical tradition he popularised is a fabrication, a nationalistic fantasy of no historical worth invented some centuries after the English conquest and disseminated throughout the British kingdoms by no process now discoverable. Either the gap in the surviving written record was created by a perfectly normal and well-attested historical process, to wit, the heretical state and its principle defenders suffered a *damnatio memoriae* at the victor's hands, or fifth- and sixth-century Britain is an anomaly outside the norms of historical development and human psychology, a country whose literate elite uniquely failed to produce any of the documents on which historians routinely depend. The first option satisfies the principles of Occam's razor, the second requires that we account, quite separately, for the gap in the record and for the British Arthurian legend, and continually accommodate a colourful variety of British exceptions advanced in support of the main hypotheses as the need arises. For the past thirty years, in the teeth of all logic, the ruling academic consensus has been the latter, and throughout that time it has been defended with more rhetoric than argument, more diatribe than debate. Clearly the flames which once burnt around the memory of our once and future king have not yet sunk into grey ashes: the impassioned antagonism of the Dark Age historians towards his very name proves that Arthur still matters, and it is not hard to work out why that is.

As R G Collingwood once famously remarked, "every new generation must rewrite history in its own way".<sup>163</sup> If people generally credited Hegel's dictum that no-one ever learned anything from history, there wouldn't be much point. The reason historians rewrite history is, precisely, to illuminate those lessons which the past may teach the present. As the needs and exigencies of the present change, so different periods and events in the past appear more pertinent. But the underlying lesson remains always the same: if it has happened, it can happen, and given similar circumstances it could happen again. So what lessons do the Dark Age historians intend our generation to learn from the black hole they profess to perceive in post-Roman British history?

We live in changing times. Many alive today have witnessed a *translatio imperii*. In the course of the twentieth century leadership of the western world passed to the USA, a one-time colony. By the 1970s Old Europe, once the heart of a global imperial system, had become peripheral. But we've been here before. In the fourth century, when the main capital of the Roman Empire moved to Byzantium, western Europe gradually found herself stranded by the receding tide of Empire, on the receiving end of decisions made elsewhere. As the ageing empire adopted various stratagems to perpetuate itself - a command economy incorporating a new, semi-servile class, a new state religion, an army of foreign mercenaries living separately under their own rulers and their own laws - the west experienced a revolution directed from without.

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<sup>163</sup> R G Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, 1946, p248

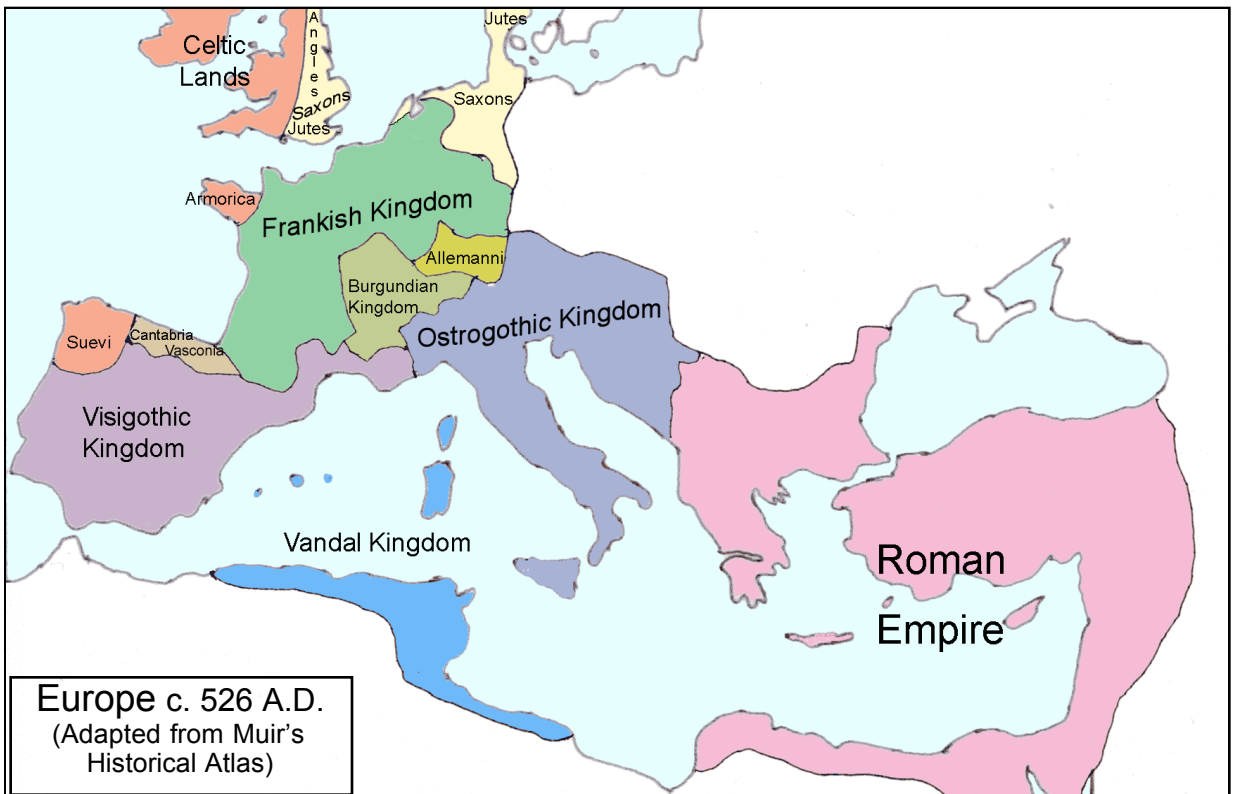
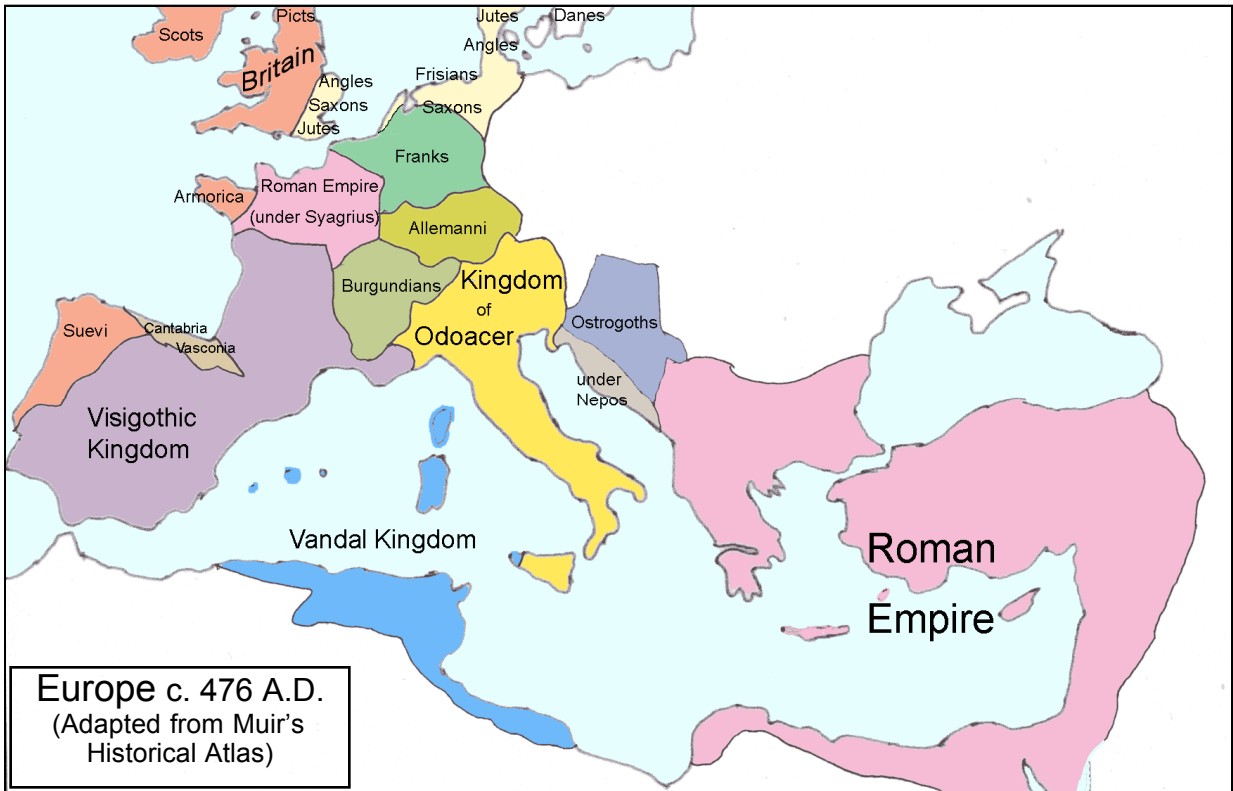
Eventually the now distant Roman emperors found it necessary to place the bulk of the western provinces they still controlled under the rule of a military psychopath - a not uncommon post-colonial expedient. Even for Rome's most ardent admirers, Late Roman Gaul under Frankish rule is not a pretty sight. But, the Dark Age historians would have us observe, there is a still more salutary lesson to be learned from Gaul's near neighbour. Early in the fifth century Britain rejected the new impositions devised for the Empire's preservation and opted to go it alone - with fatal consequences. Here the native elite were not forced to share power with uncouth and brutal barbarians, instead they lost everything as internecine warfare completely destroyed their cities and their civil society, allowing the barbarian invaders eventually to drive them from their lands. The British economy did not merely shrink and stagnate, it collapsed completely: factory-made pottery, minted coinage, disappear from the archaeological record long before the Saxon conquest. But quite the worst consequence was not the physical but the intellectual devastation visited on Britannia: as *romanitas* was lost, knowledge itself was wiped from men's minds. So the lesson we must draw from the Pelagian experiment is that a threat to the system itself is an absolute threat, and any counter-measures taken to ensure its survival, including a change of government, of economy, of law, even a change of religion, are all justified. The consequences of such measures may be unpleasant for many, but those trusted with preservation of elite power can't afford to sympathise too much with those at base of the pyramid, forced to bear its full weight, since history teaches that outside the Empire there is no salvation.

A different history would teach a very different lesson. In the historical memory of the Britons themselves the Pelagian experiment produced no such dramatic collapse. The era of British independence were not a dark but a golden age, the period of Arthur's just and glorious rule. It was this memory of a lost golden past, and the hope of its renewal, which the common people of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales still clung to in the twelfth century, in the teeth of a renewed Roman expansion. It was this alternative version of history, of a British Emperor who rejected the authority of Rome, which Geoffrey of Monmouth so brilliantly repackaged for a non-Celtic readership. It was this image of a Pelagian king seeking to rule for the benefit of all, of Arthur, true husband of Sovereignty, that the Celtic bards and storytellers passed to the heretics, feminists and assorted opponents of Rome who created the Matter of Britain, If the Britons' own version of their own past is not a vast, dishonest conspiracy concocted by an inferior race to disguise its historical inadequacies, then this alternative history promises us an alternative future. Change must occur. Empires inevitably decay. And our own, technological, oil-dependent society is clearly unsustainable, and the consequences of its inevitable disintegration difficult to predict. But if Arthur once existed, then our options are wider. We need not imagine that we will be forced to choose between Rome and Darkness, between extreme inequality backed by brutal oppression and a descent into bloody chaos. Though there must inevitably be sacrifices we can still hope to retain what we hold most dear of our native tradition and it is that hope which, still today, gilds the name of Arthur.

*Heretic Emperor: The War*

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