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Source: *The Celtic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Oct., 1905), pp. 126-135

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30070130>

Accessed: 25-12-2015 22:19 UTC

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## 'THE RUIN OF BRITANNIA'

A CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS A RESTATEMENT OF EARLY  
SAXO-WELSH HISTORY

A. W. WADE-EVANS

[This paper attempts to show that the supposed homogeneous work attributed to Gildas before 547 really comprises two distinct books; the first called 'Excidium Britanniae,' which includes chapters 1 to 26, and which was composed about 700; the second, from chapter 27 to the end, being the genuine 'Epistola Gildæ' written by Gildas before 502.]

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PART III. *Date of Composition.*

7. The alliance which Vortigern, from beyond the Wye in modern Radnorshire, made with the Saxons, exposed Roman Britain to the marauding expeditions of the latter. In order to check these, the *Excidium* tells us that the Britanni after suffering considerably, made a rally under the Roman Ambrosius and won a signal victory. Our author continues as follows:—

'From that time [*i.e.* Ambrosius' victory] our fellow citizens were sometimes victorious, sometimes the enemy, in order that the Lord according to His wont might try in this nation, the Israel of to-day 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 as I know the 44th year with one month now elapsed; it is also the year of my birth.* But not even at the present day are the cities of our patria inhabited as formerly; deserted and dismantled, they lie neglected until now, because although foreign wars have ceased, civil wars continue. The recollection of so hopeless a ruin of the island *and of the unlooked-for help* (*insperatum auxilium*) has been fixed in the memory of those who have survived as witnesses of both marvels. Owing to this (unlooked for help), kings, magistrates, private persons, priests, ecclesiastics, severally preserved their own rank. *As they died away when an age had succeeded ignorant of that storm and having experience only of the present quiet*, all the controlling influences of truth, etc. were overturned.'

Now it has been long supposed that this battle of Badon Hill refers to the twelfth great victory of Arthur in October 470. *Arthur, however, never fought a battle at Badon Hill.* In the genuine list of Arthur's victories, Badon Hill is an interpolation from this very document. At least five MSS. of the Arthurian Tractate give thirteen battles, four MSS. omit one of the names in order to make up the twelve, whilst others jumble up two names for the same purpose. Why is this? Because Badon Hill *had* to be inserted owing to the supposed evidence of the *Excidium*. The following is the genuine list :—

I. Estuary of River Glein.	VII. Forest of Celidon.
II. River Dubglas.	VIII. Castellum Guinnion.
III. River Dubglas.	IX. Caerlleon.
IV. River Dubglas.	X. Traeth or Traetheu Roit.
V. River Dubglas.	XI. Bregomion.
VI. River Bassas.	XII. Mons Agned.

The Mons Badonicus of the *Excidium* was confused with the Mons Agned which is the genuine victory of October 470, and as this was also the year of St. Gildas's birth, the following words were inserted—‘And this commences, as I know, the 44th year with one month now elapsed; it is also the year of my birth.’ Annus XLIV in era of Invitation is  $428 + 43 = 471$ , which agrees with the *Annales* and Geoffrey's number 470 as I have shown above.

Moreover, Badon Hill is described lower down as an *auxilium insperatum*, an unlooked-for help. A victory of Arthur, a chosen dux bellorum of Britannic princes could not possibly be called an unexpected help. When the military forces of Britannia combined under this chosen general who had already won eleven victories, there was nothing of the nature of unexpectedness or of help in his victory at Mons Agned in 470.

Now there is only one Bellum Badonis known in Welsh history, and it is to this the *Excidium* refers. It is placed opposite Annus ccxx[x]i in the *Annales* MS. A. as ‘Bellum

Badonis secundo.' The last word, of course, is inserted under the influence of the misunderstanding of the *Excidium*. It is the battle known to the English as *Bedan-* or *Biedan-heafod*, won in the year 675 by Wulfhere, King of Mercia, over Wessex. It was a victory which kept Wessex in a state of chaos for years, during which time the Britanni between Severn and Poole Harbour obtained respite from Saxon aggression. It will now be seen how a Britannus of this quarter could call Badon Hill 'an unexpected help.'<sup>1</sup>

8. We have still to allow for an age to succeed ignorant of the storm which culminated at Badon Hill. If the reader will look carefully through the *Excidium* he will notice that the author is continually carping against the Britanni in a manner and on grounds quite foreign to the *Epistola Gildæ*. In chapter 1 he says he will not attack the brave soldiers, for his words are directed against the 'dangers caused by indolent men,' that is the hierarchy. He proceeds as follows :—

'I saw that in our time even, as Jeremiah wept, "The widowed city sat solitary, heretofore filled with people, ruler of the Gentiles, princes of provinces, and had become tributary." *By this is meant the Church.* "The gold hath become dim, its best colour changed," *which means the excellency of God's word.* "The sons of Zion," *that is of the holy mother the Church,* "famous and clothed with best gold have embraced ordure." . . . To this age of ours has been added besides those impious and monstrous sins which it commits in common with all the iniquitous ones of the world, *that thing which is as if inborn with it, an irremovable and inextricable weight of unwisdom and fickleness.* . . . In my zeal therefore for the holy law of the Lord's house, constrained by the reasons of my own meditation or overcome by the pious entreaties of brethren, I am now paying the debt exacted long ago. The work is in fact poor but I believe faithful and friendly to all noble soldiers of Christ; *but severe and hard to bear to foolish APOSTATES.*'

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<sup>1</sup> It may be well to remind the reader at this point that the only foes of the Roman province mentioned in the *Excidium* are Picts from beyond the Wall, Scots from Ireland, and Saxons from the Saxon shore between Essex and Wight. The Angles and Frisians are not referred to. Such of these as lived south of the Wall would be Britanni to a Roman. The absence of any special reference to them by our author, seems to indicate that in the traditions which he follows, they are regarded as friendly.

He explains the ready entrance of heresies into Britain on the ground that it was *a country always wishful to hear something new and at all events desiring nothing steadfastly* (ch. 12). He explains the ‘Ruin of Britannia’ as being due to certain vices and

‘Especially the vice which to-day also overthrows the place which pertains to all good in the island, *i.e.* hatred of truth together with those who defend it, love of falsehood together with its fabricators, undertaking evil for good, respect for wickedness rather than kindness, desire of darkness in preference to the sun, the welcoming of Satan as an angel of light.’

No one can doubt but that these passages refer to something special, some falling away towards novelties on the part of the Church. There are *apostates* whom the Britanni are inclined to follow. The reference of course is to what Bede describes thus (v. 18):—

‘Aldhelm, when he was only a priest and abbot of the monastery of Malmesbury, by order of a synod of his own nation, wrote a notable book against the error of the Britons in not celebrating Easter at the proper time, and in doing several other things not consonant to the purity and the peace of the Church; and by the reading of this book *he persuaded many of them who were subject to the West Saxons to adopt the Catholic celebration of our Lord’s resurrection.*’

In other words, the Britanni between Severn and Poole Harbour were the first to surrender the Celtic Easter for that of the Latin Church. This they did whilst Aldhelm was Abbot of Malmesbury in their borders, that is to say, between 675 and 705. Now inasmuch as Bede had the *Excidium* in his hands by the year 725, it must have been compiled between some date after 675, not far from 705, when the author could reasonably speak of an age new to that which finished with 675, and on the other hand the year when Bede is known to have had the book, viz. 725.

9. Our author was writing during a period of peace from external foes, and although reference is made to civil strife he yet speaks of his age as *præsens serenitas* or the present quiet. Now Bede says (iv. 12):—

‘When Koenwalh [King of Wessex] died [in 672] his under rulers

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took upon them the kingdom of the people and dividing it among themselves held it ten years . . . Ceadwalla having subdued and removed these rulers, took upon him the government. When he had reigned two years . . . he quitted his sovereignty for the love of the heavenly kingdom and, going to Rome, ended his days there.'

The Saxon Chronicle states:—

'685. This year Ceadwalla began to contend for the kingdom.

688. This year Ine succeeded to the kingdom of the West Saxons and held it 37 years; and he built the minster at Glastonbury . . . and the same year Ceadwalla went to Rome.'

The aggression of Mercia, and perhaps the restlessness of the Britanni had thrown Wessex into confusion. Out of this tumult rose Ceadwalla and Ine of the royal race of Wessex, and perhaps of Britannic blood as well. At least they were both regarded as Britannic in those Britannic traditions upon which Geoffrey of Monmouth founded his famous book. A period of interblending seems now to have taken place between the Saxons and subject Britanni, and Celtic Christianity is seen to be giving way to the Latin form of Wessex. This appears to me to be the age of the *præsens serenitas* of the *Excidium*.

10. When Bede received the *Excidium*, the famous interpolation dating Badon as Annus XLIV etc., had already been inserted, and the little book could not but have undergone slight modifications when transcribed by an 'intelligent' editor labouring under this delusion. Bede gives no indication that he knows the *Epistola Gildæ*, so that we are justified in assuming that when he received the *Excidium* it had not as yet been prefixed to the former. One of the modifications which it underwent before Bede received a copy, was in reference to the site of St. Alban's martyrdom. In recounting supposed Diocletian martyrdoms in Britannia he mentions 'St. Alban of Verulam, Aaron and Iulius, citizens of Caerlleon, and the rest of both sexes in different places who stood firm with lofty nobleness of mind in Christ's battle' (ch. 10).

This sentence, with what follows, places us at once in S.E. Wales among the *martyria* or *merthyrs*, as they are now called, which commemorate individuals of both sexes. St.

Alban of course ought to be amongst them, that is, in Britannia, so that ‘Alban of Verulam’ must be a mistake.<sup>1</sup> Now notice that the martyr is made to cross the river Thames to the site of his sufferings, which river is impossible, as it is much too far away from the city of St. Albans. Bede, although he insists on Verulam, yet carefully avoids mentioning the name of the river. Bede also follows an independent authority in recounting this martyrdom, and it is significant that the crucial passage which locates the site in relation to the river, is corrupt (*i.e.* tampered with) in all the MSS. He tells us enough, however, to show us that Alban suffered on the side of the river opposite to the city, some distance from the city, and on a hill 500 paces from the [river]. This proves that the river referred to is the Usk in Monmouthshire, and the city is Caerlleon itself; for two miles away from the city on the opposite side of the river, and five hundred paces from it, is Mount St. Albans with the ruins of Alban’s shrine thereon. This point is of vital importance, because it is one of the localities which we are certain St. Germanus visited when he came to Britannia in the fifth century. The shrines of Aaron and Julius are also in the immediate neighbourhood.

#### PART IV. *Sources.*

11. Our author refers to his authorities in these terms :—

‘Not so much by the aid of native writings or records of authors, inasmuch as these (if they ever existed) have been burnt by the fires of enemies or carried far away in the ships which exiled my countrymen and so are not at hand, but shall follow the account of foreign writers which because broken by many gaps is far from clear.’

He distinctly refers to Rufinus’s *Ecclesiastical History*. He is also acquainted with some of Jerome’s writings, and perhaps Salvian and Orosius. He also quotes Virgil (which St. Gildas does not do, and would not do, if one may judge

<sup>1</sup> I would suggest that *verolamiensem* was an Anglian or Saxon guess or misreading for some form of the Welsh name Caerlleon written in the margin or between the lines. The scribe who added the name of the Thames could not possibly have known the neighbourhood of our modern St. Albans near London.



from his words in chapter 66 of the *Epistola*). Notice, however, that the above words do not exclude native writings, and distinctly suggest that he had at least thought of possible Britannic traditions in Armorica. If among the insular writings before him there are also those of Armorican origin, he is clearly unable to distinguish between them. There was frequent communication from the fifth century between the Britannia of Britain and that of France. Saints moved to and fro between them, and St. Gildas himself died in Brittany in 554. In this very year Procopius was writing of the three great nations of Roman Britain, viz. Frisians, Angles and 'Brettones' who were annually migrating to Gaul in vast numbers. The earliest settlements of 'Brettones' seem to have taken place in the days of Maximus, and since that time a stream of them had flowed apparently from Cornwall, 'Devon,' and Monmouth. The Armorican peninsula, from its western point, gradually became a new Britannia, with Romania to the east and even in its midst; in short, a land of 'Brettones' and Romani, like what Britannia from Usk to Dorset Avon must largely have been. If, therefore, amongst the *insular* Roman Britannic traditions which our author had before him, there were also Roman-Britannic traditions of *Armorica*, he would possibly have had some difficulty in differentiating between them. Our author's sympathies are constantly with 'Roman' as against 'anti-Roman' opinion. He says:—

'Only those evils will I attempt to make public which Britannia has both suffered and inflicted upon other and distant citizens in the times of the Roman Emperors.'

Any attempt on the part of the Britanni to act independently of the Romani, is an evil in his sight which merited an *excidium Britanniae*. He even sympathises with the Romani in the opprobrious epithets they hurl against the Britanni—'crafty foxes,' 'cowards' and the like. It is hard to explain so intense a Roman partisanship on the part of so late a writer who tells us distinctly that the last of the Romans in Britannia was Ambrosius, who was a contemporary of Vortigern in 428. We are driven to conclude that he is incor-



porating sentences and affecting attitudes from ‘Roman’ traditions, and especially from that Britannia across the Channel where Romania was so much more significant than it was in Britain. We are confirmed in this opinion by several little points, particularly the following.

12. Far and away the most celebrated passage in the *Excidium* is that which gives part of the letter to Aetius in 446, called the ‘Groans of the Britons.’ The following is the whole of it :—

‘The miserable remnant therefore sent a letter to Agitius, a man holding high office at Rome; they speak as follows:—*To Agitius in his third consulship, come the groans of the Britanni*; a little further in their request: *the barbarians drive us to the sea, the sea drives us upon the barbarians*; *by one or other of these two modes of death we are either killed or drowned*; and for these they have no aid.’

This is all, so that if we lifted the passage from the context it would cause no break in the reading. The extremely fragmentary and isolated character of so important a document and event, immediately suggests that our author is not very sure of the material he has before him. The letter is undoubtedly genuine, and is undoubtedly inserted here because of the supposed chronological coincidence. For mark that the barbarians referred to are not Saxons but Picts and Scots. The Saxons are to appear at the false date, 450 A.D., and Aetius was third time consul in 446. The letter is therefore inserted as leading up to the climax of his sermon.

Now it so happens that shortly before the year 446, the cities of Armorica had revolted, and the Patrician Aetius (who had had to deal severely with them previously) had sent against them an army of barbarians under Eocarich the Alan king. The Armoricans in terror appealed to St. Germanus of Auxerre *who had just returned from his second visit to Britain in 445*. The saint succeeded in persuading Eocarich to desist from devastating Armorica and to give a most faithful promise of peace on condition that the pardon which Eocarich had bestowed should be sought by Germanus from the Emperor *and from Aetius*.<sup>1</sup> The saint in con-

<sup>1</sup> See Constantius’ *Life of St. Germanus* (Bk. II. ch. i. § 62).

sequence went to Ravenna to intercede for the peace of Armorica, carrying the celebrated 'Groans of the Britons' with him. Our author had this document before him which he ignorantly applied to the Britanni of the island, who, as all the evidence shows, were well able to take care of themselves.

Three things in conclusion:—

(a) I most earnestly commend to my countrymen, the Britanni of to-day, the study of the *Excidium*, for it is the one great impediment which has hitherto prevented the history of Wales (and of England too) from being based on a sound scientific foundation. When the origin and nature of the *Excidium* are understood, Wales, in her beginnings in the fifth century, will be seen in proper perspective.

(b) This paper would not be (at least in its present form), were it not for the minute researches and great conquests of my friend Mr. Alfred Anscombe in the field of chronology, and especially of early British and Irish chronology. Ten years ago Mr. Anscombe, owing to his solution of the difficulties connected with the dates 428, 449, 450, etc., had come to the main conclusion which I have here attempted in my own way to elucidate, viz., that the *Excidium* is a non-Gildasian work of the seventh century. His letters will be found in the *Academy* (Sept., etc., 1895), and masterly articles from his pen will also be found in various numbers of the Celtic *Zeitschrift* and *Archiv*, the *Athenæum*, the *English Historical Review*, and in two Chronological Tracts published some years ago. All the chronological arguments in the first part of this paper are based on his researches, although of course he must not be held responsible for the way in which I state them, or for any deductions of my own.

(c) With reference to the so-called Teutonic school of English historians, headed by Stubbs, Freeman, Guest, and Green, followed by scores of imitators, it must not be forgotten that these leaders were intense English nationalists whose predispositions very naturally led them to perceive

only those facts or supposed facts and incidents which served to exalt their own nationality. When evidence was wanting (as in the case of the origin of the Angles), they sought to build up theories based on no scientific grounds, but only on what they felt as patriotic Englishmen *must* have taken place. The most conspicuous example of this is the well-known book called *The Making of England* by John Richard Green. This writer could be called not inaptly the nineteenth century Geoffrey of Monmouth, were it not that Geoffrey built up his romance on genuine traditions, whereas Green erected his on his own patriotic intuitions. In saying this, however, I am anxious not to be regarded as reflecting on these well-known writers for being such ardent nationalists (I am a nationalist myself), for it is good that he who writes on a subject should be in love with it; indeed, it is the lover who always understands best the object of his heart's affections. Moreover, I am deeply and patriotically grateful to the Teutonic school for having laid so much emphasis on the acknowledged fact that Englishmen are not Welshmen; for, in perpetually insisting on that, they also insisted on what is to me equally as satisfactory, viz., that Welshmen are not Englishmen.

## THE FIONN SAGA

(*Continued from p. 19.*)

GEORGE HENDERSON, M.A., B.Litt., PH.D.

THE CAMPBELL OF ISLAY RECENSION (*continued*)

*Fionn's Youth—First Exploit*<sup>1</sup>

To put the tale on the short cut, my dear Company, as an old man said when telling this in Uist, Gumag was seven years in that hut by the black peat pool in the forest, and every day she went to the palace in the big town to seek

<sup>1</sup> [An old version of Boyish Exploits of Fionn is translated by Dr. Meyer in *Ériu* vol. i. 1904.]