Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early and Medieval Celtic World
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Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early and Medieval Celtic World

Edited by

Jonathan M. Wooding and Lynette Olson

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Roughly four centuries separate Gildas’ *De excidio Britanniae* (‘On the Downfall of Britain’) and *Armes Prydein* (‘The Prophecy of Britain’).¹ This is not to say that tenth-century people couldn’t understand what Gildas was about. No one does it better than Wulfstan, when he writes in *Sermo lupi ad Anglos* (‘Sermon of the Wolf to the English’):

> 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.²

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² As translated at the beginning of Winterbottom’s Preface, *Gildas* 5 (actually the *Sermo* is early-eleventh-century, but Wulfstan’s career began in the late tenth).
‘Now, fellow English folk,’ says Wulfstan in effect, ‘God is going to get us for our sins: we’re about to be taken over by the Danes.’ And so they were, though with less catastrophic results than the Britons had suffered. Wulfstan could have known of Gildas via Bede, who in the early eighth century basically rewrote the historical section of Gildas’ *De excidio Britanniae* in the early part of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, or more directly.\(^3\)

The use of Gildas’ *De excidio Britanniae* by the compiler of the *Historia Brittonum* (‘History of the Britons’) in the early ninth century seems to be more often assumed than stated by modern scholars, although Heinrich Zimmer had no doubts when he wrote in *Nennius Vindicatus*:

> Nennius had as the basis for his work a kind of history of Britain, which consisted of two parts very different in nature: the cursory survey of the history of the British up to the time at which Gildas was writing with which in 540 he preceded his Jeremiad addressed to the nobility and clerics of the British ... The main activity of Nennius consisted in seeking to replace the Jeremiad of Gildas with a genuine secular history with facts and dates.\(^4\)

The compiler’s dates are ultimately owed to Bede. David Dumville considers that ‘it seems likely that the author of *Historia Brittonum* did

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know Bede’s History’, and ‘extremely likely that he had had access (and probably prolonged exposure) to Gildas’s work’. I would go further. Proof of his use of De excidio Britanniae, if any be needed, lies in one Old English loanword into Latin. Gildas writes that the first bunch of federate Saxons came in ‘tribus, ut lingua eius exprimitur, cyulis, nostra longis navibus’ (‘three keels, as is expressed by their language, long ships in ours’). The Historia Brittonum has tres ciulae, using Gildas’ English term, while Bede quotes Gildas’ Latin gloss on it, tribus longis navibus; hence we can be confident both are directly citing Gildas. Another borrowing by the author of the Historia Brittonum from Gildas is pointed out by Patrick Sims-Williams:

The outcome of the war between the Bernicians and the Britons hung in the balance: ‘yet at that time sometimes the enemies, sometimes the citizens were vanquished’ (in illo autem tempore aliquando hostes, nunc cives vincebantur)—this is a deliberate echo of Gildas on the build-up, in the time of Ambrosius Aurelianus, to the earlier British victory at Badon: ‘from that time on sometimes the citizens, sometimes the enemy, were victorious’ (ex eo tempore nunc cives, nunc hostes, vincebant).

Sims-Williams sees the story of the death of Urien in the Historia Brittonum as ‘an object lesson’ in the context of ‘the intermittent attempts to unite the Cymry against the Anglo-Saxons as a common foe so as to repeat the success of Badon—Armes Prydein being a well-known example from the tenth century.’ And he goes on to say,

‘Following Gildas, the author attributes the initial Saxon settlement to Vortigern’s rash gift of land in the east’, pointing out that this is Thanet in the *Historia Brittonum* and *Armes Prydein*. That is true in the broadest sense, although Gildas says that the Saxons were given supplies, not land. Bede actually does pretty well at rendering Gildas here, saying that the Britons gave the Saxons a place to stay, a place of habitation among them, stipends; *stipendia* rendering Gildas’ *annonas, epimenia* and the other two, *locum manendi, locum habitationis inter eos*, not incompatible with the framework of *hospitalitas* which underlies his account, in which the Britons are the Saxons’ *hospitibus*. The deep thematic continuity from Gildas’ *De excidio Britanniae* to *Armes Prydein* and beyond is the main subject of my paper, but first I want to say more about these two sources.

Gildas wrote prose, but, as Neil Wright observes, it is very poetic prose. This is evident from his opening sally against the ruler of Dumnonia, ‘Cuius tam nefandi piaculi non ignarus est imundaehaenae Damnoniae tyrannicus catulus Constantinus’. It is worth pointing out that the written word was commonly sounded at that time, even if persons were reading to themselves. In his study of ‘Gildas and

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8 ‘Tunc Anglorum siue Saxonum gens, inuitata a rege praeefato, Brittaniam tribus longis nauibus aduehitur et in orientali parte insulae iubente eodem rege locum manendi, quasi pro patria pugnatura, re autem uera hanc expugnatura, suscipit. Inito ergo certamine cum hostibus, qui ab aquilone ad aciem uenerant, uictoriam sumseret Saxones. Quod ubi domi nuntiatum est, simul et insulae fertilitas ac segnitia Brettonum, mittitur confestim illo classis prolixior, armatorum ferens manum fortiorem, quae praemissae adiuncta cohorti inuincibilem fecit exercitum. Susceperunt ergo qui aduenerant, donantibus Brittanis, locum habitationis inter eos, ea condicione ut hi pro patriae pace et salute contra aduersarios militarent, illi militantibus debita stipendia conferrent’, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I.15, Colgrave and Mynors 50.
10 *De Excidio Britanniae* 28.1, Winterbottom 99. Neil Wright kindly pointed out to me that in the account of how this Constantine killed two royal youths ‘under the cloak of a holy abbot’ in a place of worship it is the youths rather than Constantine who were *sub amphibalo*, trying to shelter there from the murderous king.
Vernacular Poetry’, which overall tends to stress the proximity of the Latin and vernacular traditions, Sims-Williams suggests that imagery from the latter may have influenced Gildas’ expression in the former. Yet Gildas does not share in the ethos of Brittonic panegyric, and one can just imagine what he would have done with Cynan and Cadwaladr, the heroes of *Armes Prydein*. To the last but not least of his rulers, Maglocunus, he complains:

When the attention of your ears has been caught, it is not God’s praises in the tuneful voice of Christ’s soldiers sweetly singing which are heard, and the strain of the Church’s melody, but your own praises, which are nothing, in the mouth of rascally bards filled with lies and liable to bedew bystanders with foaming phlegm, grating away like *Bacchantes.*

It is the reference to music in the passage just quoted that convinces one that more than just the speech of court flatterers is involved. Clerics that Gildas was berating apparently shared in this fault:

They yawn stupidly at the precepts of holy men—if they ever do hear them: though they should constantly; while they show alert interest in sports and the foolish stories of worldly men, as though they were the means to life and not death.

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12 I have been happy to insert ‘bards’ for *praecones* in Sims-Williams’ translation, as he recommends, and accept that the parasites mentioned elsewhere are bards (*ibid.* 174ff.). *De Excidio Britanniae* 34.6, Winterbottom 103: ‘Arrecto aurium auscultantur captu non dei laudes canora Christi tironum voce suaviter modulante neumaque ecclesiasticae melodiae, sed propriae, quae nihil sunt, furciferorum referto mendaciis simulque spumanti flegmate proximos quosque roscidaturo, praeconum ore ritu baccantium concrepante ...’
13 *De Excidio Britanniae* 66.4, Winterbottom 119, 52–3: ‘ad praecepta sanctorum, si aliquando dumtaxat audierint, quae ab illis saepissime audienda erant, oscitantes ac stupidos, et ad ludicra et ineptas saecularium hominum fabulas, ac si iter vitae, quae mortis pandunt, strenuos et intentos ...’
As I have written elsewhere, the stories (and the music) were too good to abandon.\textsuperscript{14}

What Gildas’ \textit{De excidio Britanniae} and \textit{Armes Prydein} most obviously have in common is prophecy. Here we have to be careful to know what we are talking about. Let us return for a moment to Wulfstan’s perceptive statement, which begins in Old English: ‘\textbf{An þeódwita wæs on Britta tìdum, Gildas hátte’}. The word \textit{þeódwita} literally means ‘wise man or counselor of the people’\textsuperscript{15}. Did the translator whom I quoted above stretch it too far to mean ‘prophet’? Isn’t this what the biblical prophets were? Gildas wrote in their tradition. He does mention non-biblical prophecy, interestingly from an English source:

\begin{quote}
The winds were favourable; favourable too the omens and auguries, which prophesied, according to a sure portent among them, that they would live for three hundred years in the land towards which their prows were directed, and that for half the time, a hundred and fifty years, they would repeatedly lay it waste.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Most interestingly, the verb \textit{vaticinabatur} is the same as that quoted by Gildas from Jeremiah: ‘\textit{falso prophetae vaticinantur in nomine meo’}.\textsuperscript{17}

In the Old Testament tradition in which Gildas writes, true prophets don’t practice divination or need omens, auguries or portents, they get their wisdom straight from God.\textsuperscript{18} There is also, however, poetic inspiration: the \textit{awen} with which \textit{Armes Prydein} begins, which according to Rachel Bromwich

\begin{quote}
\textbf{De Excidio Britanniae} 23.3, Winterbottom 97, 26: \textit{secundis velis omine augurisque, quibus vaticinabatur, certo apud eum praesagio, quod ter centumannis patriam, cui proras librabat, insidet, centum vero quinquaginta, hoc est dimido temporis, saepius vastaret’}.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textbf{De Excidio Britanniae} 81.4, Winterbottom 127. Note however ‘sancti vates’ at 37.3, Winterbottom 105.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Cf. Griffiths, Margaret Enid 1937 \textit{Early Vaticination in Welsh}, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 10–11, 30.}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Olson, Lynette 2007 \textit{The Early Middle Ages: The Birth of Europe}, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan 10.

\textsuperscript{15} Bosworth, Joseph and Toller, T. Northcote 1898 \textit{An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary}, Oxford University Press, \textit{svv þeód, wita} and \textit{þeódwita} (where the Old English quotation is given, clearly to illustrate the meaning ‘historian’).

\textsuperscript{16} De Excidio Britanniae 23.3, Winterbottom 97, 26: \textit{secundis velis omine augurisque, quibus vaticinabatur, certo apud eum praesagio, quod ter centumannis patriam, cui proras librabat, insidet, centum vero quinquaginta, hoc est dimido temporis, saepius vastaret’}.

\textsuperscript{17} De Excidio Britanniae 81.4, Winterbottom 127. Note however ‘sancti vates’ at 37.3, Winterbottom 105.

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Griffiths, Margaret Enid 1937 \textit{Early Vaticination in Welsh}, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 10–11, 30.
originates in the common Celtic inheritance of technical terms associated with poetry, which are attested in Welsh and in Irish alike … In both languages, the poet’s ‘inspiration’ implied occult knowledge, and hence the ability to foretell the future.\textsuperscript{19}

The rapid transformation of paganism into literary references, as seen in the fifth-century Latin panegyrics of Sidonius Apollinaris and eventually Milton invoking the Muse at the beginning of \textit{Paradise Lost}, may well have had counterparts in vernacular poetry of the world of Gildas, for whom paganism belongs in the past; however, I don't think he would have cared much for them. Yet that is not the point. This paper is about \textit{Armes Prydein} as a legacy of Gildas.

We have one explicit statement from the intervening centuries of how \textit{De excidio Britanniae} was regarded among the Britons. In the Life of St Paul Aurelian, written by Wrmonoc, a priest and monk at Landévennec in western Brittany, in 884, one of Paul’s fellow-monks at the Welsh monastery of Illtud is

the holy Gildas, whose wisdom of nature, industry in reading and expertise in the sacred books of canons that book, well ordered by artful arranging, which they call \textit{Ormesta Britanniae}, declares.\textsuperscript{20}

A native name for \textit{De excidio Britanniae} is intriguing. \textit{Ormesta} is a Brittonic loan-word into Latin; but of which word? Is it \textit{armes} ‘prophecy’ or \textit{gormes} ‘oppression’? Were it to be the former, then Gildas’ work is another ‘Prophecy of Britain’ to set beside \textit{Armes Prydein}. Discussion of the matter in Ifor Williams’ edition is inconclusive and in the entry for ‘Gildas’ in the \textit{Dictionary of Welsh Biography} he seems to be trying to have it both ways: ‘the word “ormesta” being a Latin form of the Welsh word \textit{armes} or \textit{gormes} or a mixture of both words.’\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Armes Prydein} line 1, I. Williams and Bromwich 2–3 with note on 17.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Vita Sancti Pauli Aureliani} 3, edited by Cuissard, C. 1881–3 Vie de Saint Paul de Léon en Bretagne d’après un manuscrit de Fleury-sur-Loire conservé à la bibliothèque publique d’Orléans, \textit{Revue celtique} 5, 421: ‘Necnon et sanctum Gyldan cujus sagacitatem ingenii industriaque legendi atque in sacris canonum libris peritiam liber ille artificiosa compositus instructione quem Ormestam Britanniae vocant declarat …’ The translation above is mine.
\end{flushleft}
Oliver Padel however has pointed out to me that its form with O- is more suggestive of *gormes* than *armes*. This suits its application to Orosius’ *History against the Pagans*, titled *Ormesta Mundi* in an apparently Breton context, which, written in the early fifth century to show that there were worse disasters in pagan than in Christian times, is full of oppression, tribulation and misery but not prophecy. It also suits Wrmonoc’s statement that Gildas wrote ‘de ipsius insulae situ atque miseriis’ and Gildas’ reference to the latter in the first sentence of his work. Yet Gildas is full of prophecy, and the context of his place and time is there throughout, just as it was for his models, the Old Testament prophets. In reading through *De excidio Britanniae* in Hugh Williams’ copiously annotated edition and translation, I was struck by how consistently apposite the chosen biblical passages were to the secular circumstances outlined in the earlier sections of the *De excidio*. Kings are threatened with the loss of their kingdoms, and ‘Weep ye priests that serve the Lord, saying, Spare, Lord, thy people; give not thine inheritance to reproach, and let not the Gentiles rule over them, lest the Gentiles say, Where is their God?’ would have had powerful resonance among a people threatened by precisely that. So there was a British, yes Celtic, tradition of poetic prophecy, but if anything it

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22 In private communication; I thank him for kindly answering my enquiry about this matter as well as reading this paper and suggesting a few emendations.
24 *Vita Sancti Pauli Aureliani* 3, Cuissard 421. For the Gildas reference see n. 46 below.
25 *De Excidio Britanniae* 83, H. Williams, 202–3: “‘flete, sacerdotes, qui deservitis Domino, dicentes: parce, Domine, populo tuo et ne des hereditatem tuam in opprobrium et ne dominentur eorum gentes, uti ne dicant gentes: ubi est Deus eorum?’” (Joel 2:17).
would have made people even more receptive to the biblical prophecy of Gildas, and indeed his reference to English prophecy, and its application to their circumstances. An important legacy of Gildas to the culture of his people was a prophetic cast to their history. It would have been all the stronger since what Gildas had warned about had so obviously come to pass.

A greater legacy is the history itself, the story of the Britons. Gildas links his people to their pre-Roman ancestors.26 It is what is said in the Historia Brittonum about Roman Britain that Dumville cites in support of the compiler’s direct knowledge of Gildas’ De excidio.27 Consideration of Armes Prydein as a legacy of Gildas focuses on the Saxon settlement in Britain. In the poem the Saxons are ignoble foreigners whose rule in Britain is not by right of descent but by wrong of treachery. Armes Prydein has more immediate concerns, but these are subsumed in the centuries-old underlying grievances against the Saxons:

how much of the country do they hold by right? / where are their lands, from whence they set forth? / where are their peoples? from what country do they come?28

A little further on in the poem are two lines for which modern translations differ, ‘The kinsmen of Garmon will be paid back with vigour / the four hundred and four years’ (Bromwich) to ‘With the help of the kinsmen of Garmon, / the four years and the four hundred will be paid for’ (Isaac).29 I would offer a different explanation for Garmon,
the main cause of the difficulty, than either scholar. Bede says that the British called the Anglo-Saxons Garmani in his own day, so the ‘kinsmen of Garmon’ here are the English, which suits the context in this part of the poem very well.30

By the end of the poem, the Saxon settlement of Britain is rewinding: ‘The foreigners (will be) starting for exile, / one (ship) after another, returning to their kinsmen, / the Saxons at anchor on the sea each day.’31 This is just one example of maritime references to Saxons in the poem which seem to me particularly Gildasian.32 In tracing this history back to Gildas I am not arguing that the poet of Armes Prydein necessarily knew De excidio Britanniae directly; Vortigern, Hengist, Horsa and Thanet of the Historia Brittonum if not vernacular tradition are present in the poem. There is a thematic difference: put simply, Gildas blames the Britons, not just their sins but the folly of the consiliarii and the superbus tyrannus in inviting in the English; Armes Prydein blames the English, with a couple of passing swipes at Vortigern.33 Still, both the De excidio and Armes Prydein draw on a common memory of the Saxon settlement in Britain; moreover, it is memory that they helped to shape in a particularly significant way.

Here aid to our understanding comes from a rather unexpected source. Now I am no great fan of applying trendy modern concepts

30 Historia Ecclesiastica V.9, Colgrave and Mynors 476): ‘Quarum in Germania plurimas nouerat esse nationes, a quibus Angli uel Saxones, qui nunc Britanniam incolunt, genus et originem duxisse noscuntur; unde hactenus a uicina gente Bretonum corrupte Garmani nuncupantur.’
33 Rebecca Thomas draws this distinction between Armes Prydein and the Historia Brittonum; I have extended it to Gildas. I am very grateful to her for kindly sending me a copy of her conference paper Memory and Identity in Armes Prydein Vawr.
to early medieval subjects, but have been struck by the appositeness of the following to ours. Paul Salopek applies it to Armenia: “Chosen trauma” is how the political psychologist Vamik Volkan describes an ideology—a worldview—by which grief becomes a core of identity. It applies to entire nations as well as individuals. Chosen trauma unifies societies brutalised by mass violence. But it also can stoke an inward-looking nationalism.\(^\text{34}\) Volkan defines it as “The image of a past event during which a large group suffered loss or experienced helplessness and humiliation in a conflict with a neighboring group.”\(^\text{35}\) And elsewhere he writes, “The chosen trauma becomes a significant marker for the large-group identity.”\(^\text{36}\) It is thus a way of analysing how a society remembers its past and as such is applicable to the present study. What is at the heart of ‘Armes Prydein as a Legacy of Gildas’ is a mother of all chosen traumas, the English settlement at the loss of the Britons. Gildas helped to shape it from the tradition of his time, giving it influential and enduring literary form. The poet of Armes Prydein took it and positively polished it in the interests of his day. That there was a large-group identity cannot be doubted. Rebecca Thomas identifies ‘the poet’s interest in Britain as a whole unit’ and ‘this vision of Britain as a single unit before the English settlements’.\(^\text{37}\) This too is a legacy of Gildas. Sims-Williams writes of Gildas: ‘Certainly, whatever his practical limitations, his aspiration is always to generalize about Britannia as a whole ... Patria, insula, and Britannia seem to be used synonymously.’\(^\text{38}\) I would go even further and add regio, for he is not the only British scholar having trouble seeing that Gildas could refer to Britain as a regio, and consequently trying to work out what part of Britain Gildas is referring to by this term.\(^\text{39}\) Yet compare De excidio, chapter 5:

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37 Thomas, Memory and Identity.
39 E.g. Thompson, E. A. 1979 Gildas and the History of Britain, Britannia 10, 216.
The Roman kings, having won the rule of the world and subjugated all the neighbouring regions and islands towards the east, were able, thanks to their superior prestige, to impose peace for the first time on the Parthians, who border on India: whereupon wars ceased almost everywhere.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Regio} for Gildas could describe an area of considerable size. Sims-Williams concludes, ‘In consequence the \textit{De excidio}, whatever the geographical limitations of its author’s effective knowledge, conveyed to posterity a strong sense of Britain’s essential unity; Gildas has a fair claim to be regarded as the father of the concept of \textit{Ynys Prydein} (“the Island of Britain”), which was to be so central to subsequent Welsh ideology.’\textsuperscript{41}

As mentioned in passing, the poet of \textit{Armes Prydein} clearly had a contemporary agenda, the details of which are much debated and need not detain us here, with one exception to which I will return.\textsuperscript{42} Where scholars concur is on the overriding concern for political unity rather than fragmentation. Sims-Williams has been quoted to this effect above. Rebecca Thomas sees the poet’s blaming of the English as concealing the disunity of the British. Dumville is another example, if what is said about Cynan and Cadwaladr in the poem is to be interpreted as meaning that ‘after the victory there will be harmony between the victorious British leaders (not—the implication would then be—a quarrel over the spoils) and consequently a continuing British unity’.\textsuperscript{43} And Helen Fulton writes,

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{De Excidio Britanni\ae} 5.1, Winterbottom 90–1, 17–18: ‘Etenim reges Romanorum cum orbis imperium obtinuissent subiugatisque finitimis quibusque regionibus vel insulis orientem versus primam Parthorum pacem Indorum confinium, qua peracta in omni paene terra tum cessavere bella, potioris famae viribus firmassent.’

\textsuperscript{41} Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons 30.


\textsuperscript{43} Dumville, Brittany and ‘Armes Prydein Vawr’ 156.
The issue which unites the entire prophetic tradition in Welsh ... is that of leadership and succession, the devastation caused by the loss of a strong leader in Wales, the armed power struggle that ensues, and the Welsh hopes for victory under an emergent and often yet-to-be-discovered leader ... the clarion call of *Armes Prydein* suggests a Welsh political unity in opposition to the English.\(^\text{44}\)

This concern too is a legacy of Gildas: ‘External wars may have stopped, but not civil ones.’\(^\text{45}\) According to his opening sentence Gildas published the *De excidio* ‘grieving with the difficulties and miseries of the country (patriae) and rejoicing with its remedies’;\(^\text{46}\) Gildas was a patriot and not without hope, so foresight in the *De Excidio* and *Armes Prydein* has something in common, but how much? The situations were rather different. Gildas’ age had known peace from external wars, the last to do so, I would think, for a very long time. Certainly tenth-century Britain could not be described thus. What the Britons had done in defeating the barbarians and ruling themselves was extraordinary in the post-imperial West. To borrow from the modern folk-song, Gildas sang of danger and of a warning and about love between his brothers and sisters. Yet within living memory there had been good rulers both secular and sacred (bishops),\(^\text{47}\) and could be again (otherwise Gildas’ work loses its point). I think he would have liked to see Britain’s cities, and certainly access to the shrines of martyrs he mentions, restored;\(^\text{48}\)

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\(^{44}\) Fulton, 17–18.

\(^{45}\) *De Excidio Britanniæ* 26.2, Winterbottom 98, 28: ‘cessantibus licet externis bellis, sed non civilibus’.

\(^{46}\) *De Excidio Britanniæ* 1.1, Winterbottom 87: ‘condolentis patriæ incommoditatibus miserisisque eius ac remediis coneductantis’; translation mine.


\(^{48}\) *De Excidio Britanniæ* 26.2, Winterbottom 98: ‘Sed ne nunc quidem, ut antea, civitates patriæ inhabitantur; sed desertae dirutaeque hactenus squalent’ and 10.2, Winterbottom 92: ‘quorum nunc corporum sepulturae et passionum loca, si non lugubri divortio barbarorum quam plurima ob scelera nostra
more than this one cannot say. The poet of *Armes Prydein* sang (one is tempted to say dreamed) of British success, after centuries of loss, through unity and battle prowess, not moral rearmament. Though Christ and St David are invoked, the ethos of the poem, in much the same way as Jones observed concerning *The Song of Roland*,49 is not Christian, with the most appalling ethnic cleansing, ‘When corpses stand up, supporting each other, as far as the port of Sandwich—may it be blessed!’50 About the unity I have a final point to make.

*Armes Prydein* foresees an alliance of the Cymry with the men of Dublin, the Irish of Ireland and the Isle of Man and Scotland, the men of Cornwall and of Strathclyde, and the Bretons; ‘they will possess all from Manaw to Brittany, from Dyfed to Thanet, it will be theirs …’51 Here Bretons and Brittany have raised eyebrows, because the English king Athelstan, to whose reign *Armes Prydein* has usually been dated, is known to have supported the Breton exiles from the Vikings and ultimately assisted them in recovering Brittany. Dumville offers a number of explanations of how the poet could include Bretons in an anti-English alliance, but he favours ‘the poet’s powerful use of a pre-existing messianic legend—which foretold a pan-Brittonic alliance to drive out the English—in the immediate political context.’ Brynley Roberts argues that

The poem was composed as a response to a particular political situation in the tenth century … but it derives its strength not merely from a reading of political possibilities and options, but from an emotional appeal to an accepted myth. There was small hope of … Bretons joining such a coalition and the poet must have known this, but no appeal to the myth … could omit them.

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49 Jones, George Fenwick 1963 *The Ethos of the Song of Roland*, Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins Press.
51 *Armes Prydein* lines 9–11, 15, 127–32, 147–54, 172–3, I. Williams and Bromwich 2–3, 10–11, 12–13; the last lines are ‘o Vynaw hyt Lydaw yn eu llaw yt vyd. / o Dyuet hyt Danet wy biewy’.
Armes Prydein as a Legacy of Gildas

Armes Prydein is an example of the use of the Welsh historical myth in a specific contemporary context.

Dumville also inclines to this view, and concludes: ‘The political world to which the myth applied stretched “o Vynaw h yt Lydaw”’.\(^\text{52}\) This is a legacy of Gildas. A pan-Brittonic alliance yes, but perish the thought that it should be anything more, as Dumville instructs us earlier in his article:

This is no pan-Celtic coalition, a concept inconceivable at that period, but rather a grouping of all the Brython (of Wales, Strathclyde, Cornwall and Brittany) together with the other Insular peoples threatened by the consolidation of English political and military power.\(^\text{53}\)

That was received wisdom when I was a postgraduate, but my resistance to it has grown over the years. The reason always given for why it is just an alliance of everyone who isn’t English is that it includes the Vikings of Dublin, as if this one exception could rule out ethnic links among the rest. They are not even given an ethnic denominator, but are gwyr ‘men’ or gynhon ‘gentiles’, that is ‘pagans’ of the place Dulyn, unlike gynhon Saesson elsewhere in the poem.\(^\text{54}\) Pagans could convert and acculturate. Perception of the results of the common Celtic cultural background such as what is said about poetic inspiration above—and entertainers travelled—is possible. True, perception of commonality with the Picts and Scots is not supported by Gildas, who likens them to ‘dark thongs of worms who wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm’,\(^\text{55}\) or Patrick’s reference to those


\(^{53}\) Dumville, Brittany and ‘Armes Prydein Vawr’ 147.

\(^{54}\) Armes Prydein lines 9, 131, 176, I. Williams and Bromwich, 2–3, 10–11, 14–15, with notes on 21 and 56–7.

who questioned his mission among Irish ‘enemies who do not know God’. Yet these Britons were part of the Christianisation of the Irish which linked these peoples. It is from the Irishman Columbanus that we have the first reference to Gildas: that Vinnian had consulted Gildas on a matter of monastic discipline, ‘et elegantissime ille rescripsit’ writes Columbanus, showing off a bit of eloquence of his own. The First Life of St Samson of Dol, whose subject travels between Wales, Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany, is the most notable example of links between these regions, but they permeate Celtic hagiography. Of course contemporaries would not have referred to a pan-Celtic consciousness as such, but we can.


58 See Lewis, Barry 2016 The Saints in Narratives of Conversion from the Brittonic-Speaking Regions, The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World: Converting the Isles I, edited by Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Turnhout: Brepols 431–56, esp. 439. An interesting study could be made of the geography of Celtic saints’ lives: it is a curious world which does focus on the Celtic-speaking regions, does link them, does exclude England (presumably because it was pagan at the time the genre originated; the Lives of the Irish St Fursey, who was active in conversion there, are an obvious exception) but not Merovingian France or Rome or, in the Lives of St Petroc, the East.

59 There is one useful modern analogy to the term ‘Celtic’ which I would like to bring to the attention of a wider audience. It concerns the Dinka people of the Sudan, and is quoted from Finnegan, William, Jan. 25, 1999 The Invisible War, The New Yorker 60. “There was so much to try to imagine in Nyamlell. I had seen one or two Dinka bulls at a distance from the village, their tremendous, lyre-shaped horns gliding above the tall grass. They were a reminder that everything one saw on a visit to a Dinka village was incidental, basically, to the real business, the main event, of Dinka life—the wut, or cattle camp, which moves with the seasons. There are Dinka groups who primarily fish or farm, but cattle-herding is the unrivalled center of Dinka social, economic, and religious life. Nyamlell might be the baai, the homestead, where grain is grown, but the wut is where a clan’s wealth lives. “The wut is my nation,” some Dinkas say, when asked about their political loyalties, and one wut may in fact wage war against another. On the other hand, the idea of
In elucidating the deep thematic continuity from *De Excidio Britanniae* to *Armes Prydein*, this study has pointed out a number of legacies of Gildas to the culture of his people. One was a prophetic cast to their history. Another was the concept of Britain as a unit, which had clearly been extended to Brittany and arguably to an even wider common culture in *Armes Prydein*. Another was concern for British unity rather than civil war. The greatest legacy was the ‘Welsh historical myth’, their ‘chosen trauma’ in Volkan’s more dynamic concept, of the loss of much of Britain to the English, to which Gildas gave influential and enduring literary form. In the terms of the subject of this book of collected studies, the two works draw upon a common memory, while their foresight has something in common albeit with a significant difference in ethos.

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a “Dinka” nation is thoroughly misleading. The name derives by most accounts from a European explorer’s poor transcription of one local chief’s name. When I asked people around Nyamlell about their ethnicity, most said “Malual,” which is a large tribal group, encompassing a great many *wut*. Nobody said “Dinka.” There is a Dinka language, shared, in many versions, by everyone conventionally described as Dinka, and its speakers have in common many cultural values and practices. But there is not and never has been a Dinka paramount chief. The term remains useful.