The textual history of the *Historia Brittonum*

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The work

- Known during the Middle Ages, usually ascribed to Gildas
  - Renaissance scholars tended to call it Eulogium Britanniae
    - And realised that the attribution to Gildas was false
    - But discovered that several manuscripts included a preface by Nennius
- Gunn’s publication of a version found in Vatican MS Latin 1964 called it Historia Brittonum
  - Used by all subsequent editors of the text
    - Who usually referred to it as a work by Nennius
- Mommsen’s edition of 1894 has dominated subsequent discussions
  - Especially with his printing of the Additamenta Nennii as a ‘second edition’
  - Dumville’s much vaunted research has resulted in the publication of a single slim volume
The manuscripts

• Numerous manuscripts of the work are known
  • Some are direct copies of others, others differ hugely in their content, phrasing and spelling

• The oldest manuscript dates from the eleventh century (Chartres MS 98)
  • It is a truncated and poorly written précis

• The second oldest is later eleventh century (Vatican MS Latin 1964)
  • It lacks some of the features found in the versions used as the basis for printed text

• The next oldest is early twelfth century (Harleian MS 3859)
  • It contains more text than almost any other version
    • Including some genealogies and annals not found in any other
  • But lacks the preface of Nennius
Manuscript groups (‘families’ or ‘recensions’) 

• This variety led nineteenth century editors to group the manuscripts 
  • Stevenson’s edition listed them in an order of usefulness without grouping them explicitly 
  • Petrie’s edition separated them into six ‘classes’ 
  • Mommsen’s edition recognised four *ordines* 
  • Dumville recognises nine recensions 
    • But four of these are late, created by conflating other versions 

• Conflicting views about how to establish an edition 
  • Editors used versions that contained the most additional material 
    • But which additional material
Previous solutions to the ‘problem’

• Establishing the ‘original’ text has long been recognised as difficult
  • Ussher had already discovered that it was hopelessly complex
    • Perhaps this is why he never published an edition
  • Gale used a version containing the preface of Nennius
    • Establishing the name of the work’s purported author

• The edition of Gunn underlined the complexity of the issue
  • Stevenson opted for the version in Harleian MS 3859
    • He was not explicit about why he considered it the best version
  • Followed by Mommsen, Faral, Lot, Morris and (tbc) Dumville
    • Only Petrie preferred the version used by Gale (for which he was much criticised)
  • Current perception is that the Harleian version is closest to the ‘original’
The groups, families or recensions

• Five principal groups were recognised by Dumville
  • The Harleian, used by Stevenson, Mommsen, Faral, Lot and Morris as the basis for their editions
  • The ‘Vatican’, first published by Gunn and the only version to appear in Dumville’s multi-volume edition
  • The Chartres, a unique manuscript not discovered until the late 19th century and published separately by Faral
  • The Gildasian, with more manuscripts than other recensions, never published individually
  • The Nennian, surviving only in Old Irish translation and as annotations to a manuscript of the Gildasian recension
Later recensions

• These late texts have been labelled by Dumville
  • The Sawley, a composite text produced by annotating a Gildasian text with material from a Nennian manuscript and other sources
    • This is the only recension to contain the Latin preface of Nennius
  • The St Johns
  • The Durham
  • The Prise

• They are all composite texts, put together by scholars using recensions attested elsewhere
  • Apart from the Sawley text, which contains the Nennian additions
A multitude of versions

• The variety of recensions has long made printing the text difficult
  • Which may be why Ussher never completed his intended edition

• Editors have tended to want to include as much material as possible
  • Leading them to prefer two particular recensions
    • The Harleian, because it contains the Saxon genealogies and notes on northern history
    • The Sawley, because it contains the Nennian preface and various additions

• Is either of them close to the archetype?
  • Most commentators believe that the Harleian recension is closest to it
    • With a few additions
  • Other recensions created by excising material seen as superfluous
A new approach: cladistics

• A technique developed by biologists to understand relationships between different species
  • Based on recognising shared characteristics
    • Grouping species and splitting off others

• Creates a taxonomy of clades
  • Entities with shared characteristics
  • So entirely descriptive
    • But with evolutionary implications

• Not so far widely used in the study of medieval and ancient texts
  • It promises a new method of classification
Shared characteristics: all recensions

• Mommsen divided the text into seven sections:
  • I Sex Aetatibus Mundi
  • II Historia Brittonum
  • III Vita Patricii
  • IV Arthuriana
  • V Genealogiae Saxonum
  • VI Civitates Britanniae
  • VII De Mirabilibus Britanniae

• These divisions do not appear in the text, with the exception of the *De Mirabilibus Britanniae*
  • Only the Harleian recension has all seven sections
  • Only sections I and II appear in all versions of the text
    • The truncation of the Chartres recension means we do not know what it contained after II
    • All other recensions contain IV and VI
Splitting and lumping

• Section III appears in the Harleian, Gildasian and Nennian recensions
  • In the Vatican recension, the text jumps without break from the end of II to the start of III and there is no disruption to the sense
    • This suggests that the *Vita Patricii* may have been inserted at this point

• Section V appears in the Harleian recension
  • The Nennian recension explains that it has been removed as ‘useless’

• Section VII appears in the Harleian, Gildasian and Nennian recensions
  • The Vatican recension ends with a chronological summary not found in other recension

• The Harleian, Gildasian and Nennian versions are more closely related to each other than to the Vatican
Losing or gaining?

• Most editors and commentators assume that material has been lost in various recensions
  • The Nennian text explicitly states why the editor has removed the *Genealogiae Saxonum*
  • It is thereby assumed that the Vatican recensions major reworking included removing these, the *Vita Patricii* and the *De Mirabilibus Britanniae*

• However, the jump from Section II to Section IV is smooth
  • Section III is best explained as an addition
  • But why is it not present in a ‘late’ (tenth-century) recension?
    • Do we need to rethink the relationship between recensions
    • Does the text grow through a series of accretions over time?
The minutiae: the spelling of proper names

• The spelling of proper names varies hugely in some cases
  • As with the contents of recensions, this permits groupings

  • *negue* Harleian, *neguo* Gildas, *neugio* Vatican, *neugo* Chartres, *negua* Nennius
  • *boguarii* Harleian, *bogari* all others
The ‘Arthurian battle list’

• There is a major crux in §56: the eleventh battle name varies hugely
  • *agned* Harleian
  • *agned cat bregomion* Pseudo-Gildas
  • *breguoin... cat bregion* Vatican

• How can this best be explained?
  • *agned* is a difficult (and probably corrupt) word
  • *cat breg(om)ion* seems to have vanished from the Harleian Recension
    • Perhaps *breguoin* has also vanished

• So could <*agned*> be a mutilated *[br]egu[oin] id [est]*?
  • This places the Pseudo-Gildas and Vatican Recensions in close alignment
The consequences of cladistics

• If we start to group elements of the text by shared characteristics, some surprising observations emerge
  • The Vatican and Chartres Recensions are very close, as has long been recognised
  • The Pseudo-Nennius and Harleian Recensions are closely related, which has also been long recognised
    • Their common ancestor is closely related to the Pseudo-Gildas Recension, which goes against received opinion
• The most economical explanation for the development of the work is that it grew by accreting additional segments of text
  • Notably the *Vita Patricii* and *De Mirabilibus Britanniae* in the common ancestor of the Harleian, Pseudo-Gildas and Pseudo-Nennius Recensions
  • Also the *Genealogia Saxonum* in the ancestor of the Harleian and Pseudo-Nennius Recensions
Cladograms *versus* family trees

- Liebermann attempted a stemma based on Mommsen’s critical apparatus
  - He grouped the Vatican and Chartres Recensions, placing them as close neighbours with the Harleian Recension
  - He placed the Pseudo-Gildas and Sawley Recensions on a collateral branch
- The stemma does not work, even using only Mommsen’s variants
  - It assumes that later recensions developed by losing key parts of the text, including the Nennian Preface, preserved only in a side branch
    - It does not explain how the same elements were lost in different branches
    - It does not reflect accurately the known relationships between manuscripts
- A cladogram avoids these issues
  - But it implies a developmental process
Dethroning the Harleian

• The Harleian Recension is neither the earliest nor the best state of the text
  • It is a relatively late development, dependent on revisions dated 858×9
  • Chartres MS 98 (Mommsen’s Z) and Vatican MS Latini 1964 (Mommsen’s M) are both older than Harleian MS 3859

• To understand the archetype, it is necessary to determine the contents of the ancestral text of each clade (i.e. each recension)
  • No single manuscript contains the original text
    • So a reconstruction of the archetype must use all the variants
  • The Vatican and Chartres Recension contain important and overlooked insights into the original Historia
The place of ‘Nemniuus’

• Dumville showed in the 1970s that the attribution to Nennius is false
  • The preface is found only in the conflated Sawley Recension and Old Irish translation
    • It gives the name most authoritatively as Ninnius
    • It is unclear if this is meant to be the same person as the Welsh scholar Nemniuus whose existence is confirmed by the text in the Oxoniensis Prior manuscript

• The preface is not an accurate guide to how the work was composed
  • It figures only as a ‘late’ element in the cladogram
    • It cannot have been present in ancestral texts
  • The ‘heap’/compilation interpretation must be abandoned
    • It is a carefully authored work
Resetting the consensus

• The Chartres Recension is the only witness to the earliest state of the text
  • It lacks any reference to Merfyn Frych and probably predates 829
    • But by how much?
    • But it consists of excerpts, poorly copied from a mutilated original

• The ‘Vatican’ Recension should be renamed Edmundine
  • It was in 944, during the reign of Eadmund the Elder, that the text was re-edited from a version lacking the revisions of 858×9
    • The revision of 858×9 was carried out in the reign of Rhodri Mawr

• The Rodrician revision inserted the *Vita Patricii* and the *De Mirabilibus Britanniae*
  • This became the basis for the Harleian Recension and the Pseudo-Nennius Recension, the latter probably made in 919
A minimalist interpretation

• The original text was probably called *Genealogia Brittonum*
  • It was anonymous

• It opened with an exposition of universal chronology, *De Aetatibus Mundi*
  • Followed by a description of Britain and the origins of its peoples, set in this chronological framework

• The *Genealogia Brittonum* linked the Britons with Biblical ancestors
  • This is followed by an account of Roman rule in Britain

• The longest section deals with Guorthigirn and his relations with Saint Germanus and with the Saxons
  • The work ends with the increase in Saxon population, the resistance of Arthur and the rise of Ida of Bernicia
Unfinished business?

• It is a very short work with a curious ending
  • The Edmundine Recension hints at a final chronological summary, which seems reasonable

• Early medieval writers were clearly unhappy with the text
  • They had no hesitation in adding to it
    • Short glosses
    • Entire sections
  • Koch has suggested that it may have been viewed as a workbook
    • More likely as a work in progress

• By the eleventh century, its anonymity was seen as a problem
  • One editor – perhaps in Scotland – foisted it on Nemniuus, a scholar who had lived at roughly the right period
  • Another attributed the work to Gildas
    • And under that name, it was more widely known than the genuine work of Gildas
My work

• I have been using cladistics to attempt a reconstruction of the earliest recoverable form of the text
  • This is the ‘Merminian Recension’ of 829

• There was an earlier version, for which the Chartres MS is our only witness
  • This is not enough to enable an accurate reconstruction to be made
  • But features (such as the correct constantius constantini magni pater) not found in other recensions indicate that errors crept in to the Mermian text

• There is nothing to connect the first Genealogia Brittonum with Gwynedd
  • Instead, I suggest that it is a work composed in south-east Wales, probably in Buellt

• I intend to submit my edition for publication late this year