

# 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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
- §17 *hessitio* Harleian, *ysition* Gildas, *hisition* Vatican, *hission* Chartres, *isacon* Irish Nennius
  - *negue* Harleian, *neguo* Gildas, *neugio* Vatican, *neugo* Chartres, *negua* Nennius
  - *boguarii* Harleian, *bogari* all others
  - *ougomun* Harleian, *ogomun* Gildas, *ogomuin* Vatican, *egomuin* Chartres, *ogaman* Irish Nennius
  - *simeon* Harleian, *semeon* Gildas, *semion* Vatican, *semoin* Chartres, *semoib* Irish Nennius

# 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 'Nemnius'

- 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 Nemnius 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 Nemnius, 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 Merminian 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