



The After Life of Tyrants: Roman Emperors in Early Medieval Wales

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ABSTRACT

Early medieval Welsh historians associated the end of Roman Britain not with Constantine III in A.D. 410, but with Magnus Maximus in 383. Writers like Gildas and 'Nennius' must be seen on their own terms, not 'cherry picked' for items of information. Gildas' mis-dating of Hadrian's Wall, his emphasis on Magnus Maximus and omission of Constantine III reflect the rhetorical needs of his narrative. Two other usurpers, Carausius and Magnus Maximus, were long kept in mind: Carausius as a defender of Britain and source of legitimate power, Magnus Maximus, whose supposed wife Elen was sometimes conflated with St Helena, as a legitimising ancestor for saints and kings, associated with the end of Roman rule and the beginnings of post-Roman state formation in Wales and Brittany.

Hitler's Armaments Minister Albert Speer complained in 1945 that 'history always emphasises terminal events' (Beevor 2002, xxxiii). He was thinking of a different empire, but his words help to explain the current interest in the terminal events of Roman Britain and in what happened afterwards. In this paper I shall consider how that terminal event was remembered in early medieval western Britain and how it shaped our historical dialogue on Roman Britain.

GILDAS AND THE BUILDING OF HADRIAN'S WALL

St Jerome famously described Britain as 'a province fertile in tyrants (*fertilis provincia tyrannorum*)' (Jerome, *Letters* vol. 56, no. 133.9.13) — the military usurpers who can be seen in hindsight as milestones on the road to ruin for Roman Britain. The posthumous reputations of three of these — Carausius, Magnus Maximus and Constantine III — are relevant to how we see the events of A.D. 410. In Wales, the end of Roman rule was later always associated, down to modern times, not with A.D. 410 and Constantine III, but with 383 and Magnus Maximus. Gildas, who ignored Constantine III for rhetorical reasons, the ninth-century author of the *Historia Brittonum* known as Nennius from a spurious twelfth-century preface, and the twelfth-century prose tale *Breudwyt Macsen Wledic* ('The Dream of Prince Macsen') in the *Mabinogion* told how he took the Roman army from Britain, never to return. This was linked to an origin story of the British settlement of Armorica, allegedly by the former soldiers of Magnus Maximus.

Discussions of Magnus Maximus or Vortigern drawing on such early sources crop up in modern accounts of Roman Britain and may have influenced our ideas more than we recognise. The post-Roman traditions were not popular folk memories, but scholarly constructs, put together by early medieval historians, or sometimes by professional story-tellers. Often we can identify their sources. We also need to consider the wider agenda of writers like Gildas.

Gildas, probably writing *c.* A.D. 530–545 (Charles Edwards 2013, 215–19), possibly in south-west England, placed the building of Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall, or possibly the Vallum south of Hadrian's Wall, between the fall of Magnus Maximus in A.D. 388 and Aetius' third consulship in A.D. 446–454. However, he was not writing history, but a sophisticated late Roman rhetorical composition. Had he wished, Gildas could probably have written a chronologically coherent work, but what mattered was not the sequence of events, but the structure of his narrative. *De Excidio* is 'the product of a mind shaped in the Latin rhetorical tradition' (Wright 1985, 31). The sources at his disposal included Rufinus' translation of Eusebius, Orosius, Sulpicius

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Severus' *Vita Martini*, the *passio* of St Alban of Verulamium, and some works of St Jerome (Wright 1985, 31–5; Lapidge 1984); it is an intriguing question where in early sixth-century Britain he might have found such a library. It would explain much if he was using a collection of extracts like a later medieval *Florilegium*. For example, he cites 'an island fertile in tyrants', but attributes it to the third-century neoplatonist and biographer of Plotinus Porphyry (*De Excidio* 4).

Gildas begins with a geographical description of Britain taken from Orosius. His failure to utilise later chapters of Orosius' *Seven Books of History* has led to suggestions that he never read beyond the opening pages, or was using an epitome, but this may be to misunderstand Gildas' purpose. His historical section begins with the Claudian invasion and revolt of Boudicca, the 'treacherous lioness', a metaphor he uses elsewhere for a queen. He continues with the origins and spread of Christianity up to Diocletian taken from Rufinus. Sharpe (2002, 109–10) has pointed out a specific reference to Rufinus' *Historia Ecclesiastica* in Gildas' phrase '*Historia Ecclesiastica narrat* (tells)'. There is also a version of the fifth-century *Passio S Albani* and mention of other British martyrs (Sharpe 112–20).

One of Gildas' leading themes is that peace and security breed moral laxity. The Peace of the Church led to the growth of heresy and to that other infidelity, usurpers. This is where Magnus Maximus comes in. 'He departs with the army of Britain, never to return' (*De Excidio* 1.14). After his departure with the army Gildas begins a wholly new story, *De Defensione*, at 1.15 with the building of a turf wall and then a stone wall. There is a seismic fault line in his narrative here, but if he had placed Magnus Maximus in his proper chronological position, after the building of the walls, it would have destroyed the essential logic of his story. The Pictish invasion results in a Roman rescue mission and the building of a turf wall. A second invasion, due to the inertia of the Britons, leads to another rescue mission and the building of Hadrian's Wall 'in a straight line, from sea to sea, between cities'. Accepted wisdom, deriving from St Jerome, ascribed Hadrian's Wall to Septimius Severus, so that in a sense the Antonine Wall is in its correct relative position. Orosius, following Jerome, has Severus invading Britain to put down a revolt after the death of Clodius Albinus and recovering part of the island, followed by severe fighting and the building of Hadrian's Wall (Orosius 7.17). This may have influenced Gildas' narrative. Higham (1994, 32) has explained Gildas' silence on Constantine III, who is in Orosius — Gildas had given specimen charges of heresy and usurpation and linked Magnus Maximus to the resulting downfall of Roman Britain. To introduce further usurpers would simply have confused the argument.

CARAUSIUS HIC IACET

The first of our trio of usurpers, again omitted by Gildas, is Carausius (A.D. 287–293). Boon (1972, 62; see Knight 2013, 15–17) showed that under Carausius or Allectus (A.D. 293–296) buildings in the legionary fortress at *Isca* (Caerleon) were declared surplus to requirements and demolished. Much of the legion had been absent on detached duty for long periods, leaving areas of the fortress empty, even before Carausius. The nature of post-Carausian occupation at Caerleon involves not only the archaeological evidence from the fortress, but the size and nature of Roman legions in Late Antiquity and the possible military role of towns such as Caerwent. Inscriptions from the *principia* show that the *primus pilus* or senior centurion, who had charge of the legionary eagle, was present at Caerleon in September 234 under Severus Alexander and in September 244 under Gordian III, presumably with the first cohort and the standards. Other inscriptions show troop movements and building work under Valerian and Gallienus and under Aurelian (*RIB* I, 237, 238, 334; *Britannia* 15 (1984), 337–41).

After Carausius' murder we might have thought that his memory would be relegated to what Gibbon called 'the decent obscurity of a learned footnote'. However, around 1810 an inscription was found beside a Roman road a few miles north of Penmachno in Gwynedd, where it now is. It reads *CARAVSIVS HIC IACIT IN HOC CONGERIES LAPIDUM* 'Carausius lies here in this heap of stones' (Edwards 2013, Penmachno 4, CN 38; Knight 1995). The emperor Carausius was not a Briton, but a Menapiian, from the coasts of Belgium or southern Holland. So why should an aristocratic baby in sixth-century Gwynedd be named after a third-century Dutch admiral? The only parallel I can think of is a South African baby also named after a long dead

admiral — Nelson Mandela. Carausius' parents were similarly celebrating past imperial glory. The author of the early ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* ('Nennius'), writing in Gwynedd, also attributes Hadrian's Wall to Septimius Severus. Knowing Severus died in Britain, he assumes that he was murdered and has Carausius invading Britain to avenge his murder on 'all the little kings of the Britons (*omnes regulos Brittanorum*)' as well as adding seven forts to 'Severus' wall' (*Historia Brittonum* 23–4). Presumably some narrative, written or oral, handed down an account of how Carausius had been emperor of Rome, defended Britain against invaders and represented, paradoxically, a source of legitimate imperial power.

MAGNUS MAXIMUS AND THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

This was certainly the case with our second usurper, Magnus Maximus, the Macsen Wledig, or Macsen the Prince, of Welsh tradition. The facts are familiar. He was a military commander who, after a successful campaign in northern Britain, was hailed emperor by his troops in A.D. 383 and extended his rule to Gaul and Spain, before being suppressed by Theodosius I, who initially accepted him as a legitimate colleague, in A.D. 388 (Casey 1979; Jarrett 1983). Opinions on Magnus Maximus were sharply divided from an early date. Official sources such as the panegyric delivered in front of the emperor Theodosius in the summer after the fall of Magnus Maximus were unsurprisingly hostile (Drepanius Pacatus in *Panegyrici Latini III* (1955), Panegyric to Theodosius cc. 23–46, pp. 90–113). This official view was echoed by Gildas (*De Excidio* 1.13) in an immensely influential passage:

Britain sent Maximus to Gaul with a great retinue of hangers on, and even the imperial insignia. Of the two legitimate emperors, he drove one from Rome (Valentinian II), the other (Gratian) from his life. ... soon though ... he had his wicked head cut off in Aquileia. After that Britain was despoiled of her whole army, her military resources, her governors, brutal though they were, and her strong youths, who followed in the tyrant's footsteps, never to return.

That was the speech of the prosecuting counsel. Many Gallic sources took a different view. Sulpicius Severus (*Vita Martini* 20) calls Maximus 'a vigorous and honest man, worthy to be Augustus, had he not risen to power by usurpation' and 'a man whose whole life would have been praiseworthy, if he could have refused the crown thrust upon him by a mutinous army and refrained from waging civil war. But a great empire cannot be refused without risk, or retained without fighting'. His portrait of Maximus' wife humbly waiting on Martin at table, like a servant (*Dialogues* 1.2.7), though a comment on some of the far from humble great ladies of Late Antiquity, is the ultimate source of Helen, Leader of the Hosts, Maximus' bride in the Welsh romance *Breudwt Macsen Wledig*, though she has been conflated with Helena, mother of Constantine the Great. This favourable view echoes Orosius (7.34.9): 'Maximus, a vigorous man of proven ability and worthy of the purple, had he not broken his oath ... (and been) ... almost against his will, declared emperor by the army in Britain'. Humphries (1996) has suggested that there may have been a lost Gallic narrative favourable to Maximus, perhaps one of the lost late Roman histories by Sulpicius Alexander and Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus quoted by Gregory of Tours (*Historia Francorum* 2.9).

The reasons for this favourable view are easy to understand. In sources like the letters of the fifth-century bishop Sidonius Apollinaris there is a strong feeling that Gaul had been abandoned by the Romans and that its defence came low in the priorities of the 'Italian' emperors. After Magnus Maximus, whose court was at Trier, few emperors ventured north of Lyon. Prosper of Aquitaine (*Chronicle* 1247, *sub anno* 412) made the significant comment that Constantine III defended the frontiers of Gaul better than anyone since Magnus Maximus, whilst Zosimus (6.3) wrote that he safeguarded the Rhine, neglected since the time of Julian.

AN END AND A BEGINNING: A.D. 410 IN CONTEXT

It was under Constantine III in A.D. 410 that Honorius is said to have issued his so-called rescript instructing the 'cities' (perhaps meaning provinces: Lütkenhaus 2012) of Britain to look to their

own defence and in effect ending Roman Britain. We only know of this from one short sentence in the Byzantine writer Zosimus. Bartholomew's resurrection of the suggestion that he was writing not about Britain (*Brettannia/Bpētiavia*) but about Bruttium in the toe of Italy (*Brettia*) triggered controversy (Bartholomew 1982; Thompson 1983; Woods 2012). It may be worth looking at what Zosimus actually says, and the structure of his narrative.

Zosimus, writing in Constantinople in the early sixth century and using a lost work of Olympiodorus of Thebes of c. A.D. 425–440, begins 'Celtic affairs have not yet been given the attention they deserve'. He goes on to describe the usurpers of A.D. 406–407, Marcus and Gratian and the career of Constantine III up to the point where his regime was getting into difficulties. He then gives his famous description of how Britain and the 'Celtic peoples' took up arms and expelled Constantine's officials (Zosimus 6.2–5). The authorities often found it less damaging to attribute the loss of territory to a 'revolt' than to admit that it was due to the feebleness of their rule. However, this may have been simply one more military coup. Zosimus continues: 'Now the defection of Britain and the Celtic peoples took place during Constantine's tyranny'. He then signs off from his Celtic interlude and switches to Italy, with Alaric's siege of Rome, his puppet emperor Priscus Attalus, and Honorius in Ravenna. This continues for eight chapters, until it ends abruptly. The 'Rescript' is an isolated phrase in the middle of this, with no indication that he is returning to his 'Celtic' theme.

Zosimus is sometimes thought of as a mere summariser of sources such as Olympiodorus of Thebes, but here he presents a coherent and well-organised narrative and shows every sign of being in full command of his material. He describes how Alaric attacked northern Italy around Milan and Turin to force recognition of Priscus Attalus. He moved on Ravenna, but was halted when he failed to capture Bologna and shifted his line of attack to Liguria on the west coast. Honorius then wrote to the cities of Britain or Bruttium (Calabria in the toe of Italy) instructing them to look to their own defence. It is hard to believe that Honorius, holed up behind the marshes of Ravenna, with Gaul, Spain and northern Italy in hostile hands, would have been able to communicate freely with the cities of a breakaway British regime. A similar confusion can be seen in some versions of the Hieronymian Martyrology, where martyrs from Brescia and Bithynia were misread as being from Britain (Delehaye 1931).

Despite the fame of A.D. 410, Constantine III, in contrast to Magnus Maximus, has left little trace in later tradition. As Higham (1994, 32) explained, Gildas was not writing history, but a sophisticated rhetorical tract denouncing the British kings and clergy. He had already given star billing to Magnus Maximus as a tyrant and blamed him for the loss of Roman Britain. It would have spoiled the effect if he had added an account of Constantine III. So Gildas wrote Constantine out of history.

MACSEN WLEDIG, EMPEROR OF ROME

This was certainly not the case with Magnus Maximus. By the ninth century this Spanish generalissimo was seen as a prestigious ancestor figure for Welsh kings and saints. The only one who could match him was Anna, and she was a cousin of the Virgin Mary. A lost 'Book of St Germanus', which seems to have been a source of the *Historia Brittonum*, conflates the Powysian saint Harmon with St Germanus of Auxerre. It has a complicated story of the end of Roman Britain involving Magnus Maximus, Vortigern and St Germanus. The ninth-century Pillar of Eliseg at Valle Crucis had an inscription, recorded in the seventeenth century, similarly claiming that Severa, daughter of 'Maximus, who slew the king of the Romans' married Vortigern and had a son Britu 'whom Germanus blessed', and from whom the kings of Powys were descended (Edwards 2009). 'Nennius', writing in Gwynedd, had a less flattering version. He had an interest in chronology and his statement that the appointment of Roman consuls began in the time of Magnus Maximus suggests that he had got hold of a consular list beginning around A.D. 383–388 (*Historia Brittonum* 26). Probably using Victorius of Aquitaine's *Cursus Paschalis* with its Easter Table and list of consuls, he realised that it was chronologically impossible for Vortigern to have married a daughter of Magnus Maximus. Instead, Vortigern has a son by his own daughter, and comes to a bad end. Magnus Maximus in the meantime 'withdrew from Britain, with all

his military force, and slew Gratian king of the Romans'. He then settled his troops in Brittany 'and there', says Nennius, 'they remain to the present day'. As a result, Britain was overrun with foreigners (*Historia Brittonum* 27–39).

Two early collections of Welsh pedigrees trace the descent of Welsh rulers from Magnus Maximus. British Library Harleian Ms 3859 contains the *Historia Brittonum*, the earliest (A) version of the *Annales Cambriae*, with entries to 954, and pedigrees for Owain ap Hywel Dda (d. 988). Pedigree 2 (Bartrum 1966, 9–10) is inflated with a series of doublets due to mistaking a Biblical style genealogy (A begat B, B begat C, C begat D, etc.) for a simple king list. Thus Maximus' father is Protec, his grandfather Protector, echoing the sixth-century memorial stone reading '*Memoria Voteporigis Protictoris*' from Castell Dwyran, Carmarthenshire. Possibly oral recitation of the royal pedigree had a hand in this. Edwards (2007, 202–6, CM3; 2009, 168–9) has similarly suggested that the royal genealogy on the Pillar of Eliseg was intended for formal recitation at public assemblies. It is tempting to speculate that one of Votepor's kin had been enrolled in the *Protectores*, perhaps by Magnus Maximus, who would have needed to recruit a bodyguard. This is going well beyond the evidence, but for a parallel see Hariulfus *Protector* of royal Burgundian blood (*CIL*13, no. 3682). Beyond Magnus Maximus and a mysterious Stater Pincr Misser, which sounds like a garbled Latin phrase, Owain's line is traced to Constantine the Great and his mother Helena, *Helen Luicdauc* 'of the hosts'. The fourth genealogy derives the rulers of *Ynys Manaw* (in context Anglesey not Man) from '*Maxim Guletic qui occidit Gratianum regem Romanorum*', echoing the wording of the Pillar of Eliseg (Bartrum 1966, 10).

The tenth-century Jesus College Ms 20 version, surviving in a manuscript of c. 1350–1400, is more straightforward. Maximus is the grandson of Constantine the Great and Helena and has a son Custennin (Constantine). However, this is one of a group of genealogies giving Rhodri Mawr of Gwynedd suitable ancestors, including Coel Hen, Vortigern and Cunedda. Magnus Maximus is here little more than a stage property (Jesus College, Oxford Ms 20; Bartrum 1966, 45–6). One complication in such sources is confusion between emperors of similar name, or even *maximus* 'greatest' as an adjective. Nennius claims that Maximianus (A.D. 286–308) — instead of Magnus Maximus — was a contemporary of Martin of Tours and conversed with him (*Historia Brittonum* 26). The twelfth-century genealogy of St Cadoc of Llancarfan also traces his descent from Magnus Maximus. It has a garbled list of Roman emperors back to Augustus, mistaken for a Biblical style genealogy (A begat B, etc.). This has surprising results. Cleopatra (presumably Claudius Gothicus) is said to have 'begotten' Aurelian and *Carocius* (Carausius) 'begat' Diocletian (British Library Ms Vespasian A XIV, *Vita Cadoci* c. 45; Wade Evans 1944, 116–17).

By the early thirteenth century the legend of Maccsen Wledig had reached full flower. The Dream of Prince Maccsen is one of the prose tales that travelled down in the wake of the four mythological stories known as the Four Branches of the *Mabinogion* (basically a modern name). Roberts (2005, lxxxv) dates it to around 1215–18 in the reign of Llywelyn the Great and has suggested that the depiction of Maximus as a king ruling over other kings may reflect the claims of the princes of Gwynedd to hegemony over other Welsh rulers (Davies 2007, 103–10). The Dream is a medieval romance, written by a professional storyteller of great skill, using romance themes such as the lover's dream and the otherworld castle. It has little concept of a Roman Empire as such and at one stage Magnus Maximus conquers medieval Burgundy. Maccsen, Emperor of Rome, was 'best fitted to be emperor of all that had gone before him' — a verdict that would have astounded Gildas. During a siesta whilst hunting in the Tiber Valley he dreams of travelling over the Alps and Gaul to *Segontium*, where he sees the beautiful Elen — 'Helen of the Hosts' — in a castle with her brothers. When he wakes 'there was not one joint of his bones, not the middle of one finger nail, to say nothing of any part that might be greater than that that was not filled with love of the maiden'.

Maccsen sends out messengers and eventually travels to *Segontium* (Caernarvon), marries Elen and founds Caerleon and Carmarthen as her bride price. She then builds Roman roads throughout Wales, known as Sarn Helen, just as in Gaul Roman roads were named Chaussée Brunehaut, after a Merovingian queen. Maccsen returns to Rome, which he re-captures with the help of Elen's brothers, who then colonise Brittany. The author's conflation of Magnus Maximus' removal of the army of Britain and the colonisation of Armorica is borrowed from the *Historia*

Brittonum. The association of Constantine and Magnus Maximus with *Segontium* is older than the Dream of Macsen. Nennius claimed that Constantius, son of Constantine the Great, was buried at *Segontium*: ‘His sepulchre, as appears by the inscription on his tomb, can still be seen near the city called Cair Segont’ (*Historia Brittonum* 25). Presumably this was a Constantinian inscription that was still visible in the ninth century.

In 1282 Edward I began building Caernarvon Castle close to *Segontium*. Taylor (1986) thought the distinctive towers and banded masonry reflected the Theodosian walls of Constantinople and Edward’s imperial ambitions. Wheatley (2010) has suggested that Caernarvon reflects not Constantinople, which Edward never visited, but late Roman town walls using *opus mixtum*, with banding courses of red tile. Edward also matched his exhumation of Arthur and Guinevere at Glastonbury with the translation of the body of a Roman emperor, father of Constantine the Great, ‘*Maximi Principi patris Imperatoris nobilis Constantini*’ at *Segontium*, the body being ‘placed honourably in the church, to the joy of the king’ (*Flores Historiarum* III, 59). Taylor thought that this was intended as Magnus Maximus, said in some sources to be father of a Constantine, but contemporaries would have known from Gildas and Bede that he had been executed in Aquileia. The ‘Great Prince’, as Wheatley translates the phrase, was presumably Constantius Chlorus, who died in Britain and whom Nennius claimed was buried at *Segontium*. If, as Roberts suggests, Macsen Wledig was associated with the native dynasty of princes, Edward may have wished for an alternative imperial ruler.

Some versions of the originally twelfth-century tract *Bonedd Y Saint* ‘Descent of the Saints’ make St Peblig, patron of Llanbeblig near *Segontium*, the son of Macsen Wledig and Elen (*Bonedd Y Saint* 63; Wade Evans 1944, 323; Bartrum 1966, 51–67). Recent excavations by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust near Llanbeblig church revealed late Roman corn-drying kilns succeeded by five square-ditched timber mortuary enclosures, similar to those known from other early medieval Welsh sites. Each mortuary enclosure was the focus for a group of dug graves. Radiocarbon dates are awaited (lecture by Andrew Davidson, Cardiff, 19 November 2011). However, given the manuscript tradition, the reference in *Bonedd Y Saint* could derive from *Breudwyd Macsen Wledig* rather than being an independent witness.

Medieval writers were beginning to feel their way towards a concept of the history of Roman Britain, and the significance of whatever date they saw as its end. They often had ulterior motives. Geoffrey of Monmouth and Giraldus Cambrensis claimed Caerleon as the third archiepiscopal see of Britain, later moved to St Davids, as the Roman ruins there were alleged to prove (*Historia Regum Britanniae* 4.19; 9.12–13; *Itinerarium Cambriae* c. 5). This, like William Marshal’s possible destruction of Caerleon’s standing Roman buildings after he had driven out its last Welsh lord in 1217 and Edward I’s translation of a body claimed as Constantius Chlorus, was enmeshed in contemporary ecclesiastical and secular politics (Brooke 1958; Howell 2000), though Marshal also appreciated the useful source of high quality building stone. These early scholars and storytellers had a long way to go. Objective study of Caerleon’s remains had to wait for Elizabethan scholars like William Camden and his friend Francis Godwin, Bishop of Llandaff, the first person to catalogue and collect its Roman inscriptions; some, preserved at his palace at Mathern, still survive. Similarly the eccentric Elizabethan poet-traveller Thomas Churchyard gave the first ‘archaeological’ description of its remains (Knight 2000 and forthcoming). But the medieval writers and storytellers had made a start.

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