

III CUNEDDA AND THE FOUNDATION OF GWYNEDD

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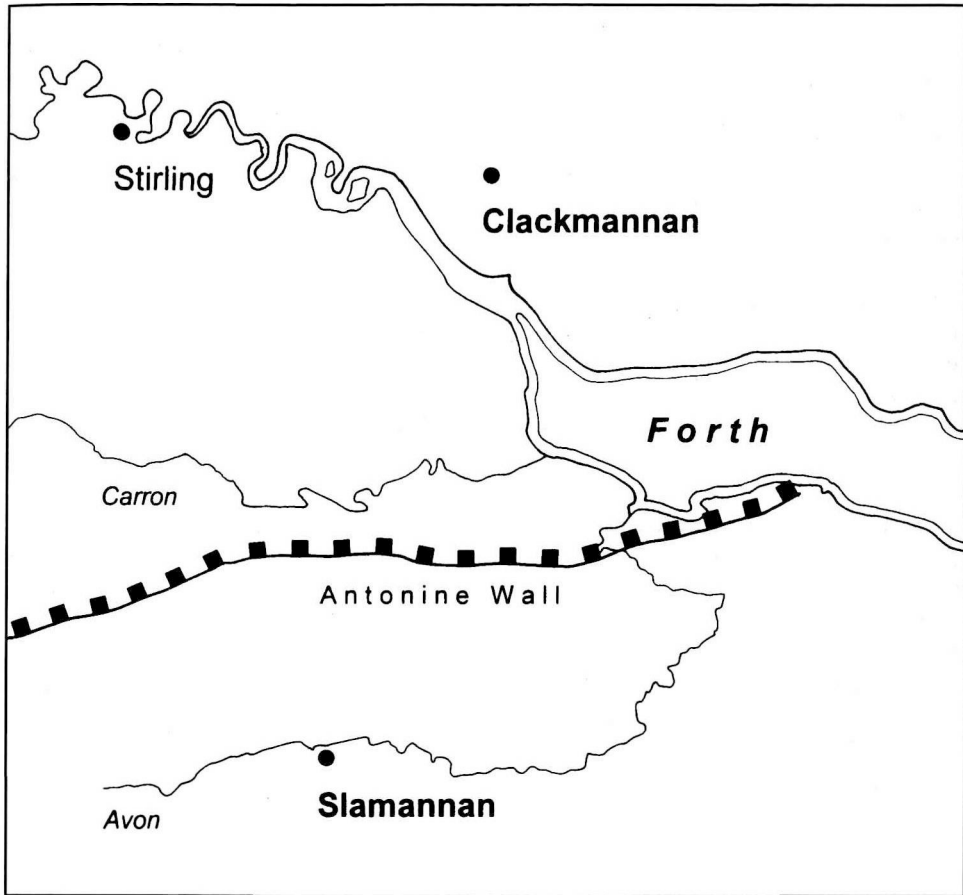
The story of Cunedda's migration from Scotland to Wales forms an intriguing link between the histories of the two countries, for from it is said to have stemmed the foundation of the kingdom of Gwynedd.¹ We are told that this was followed by expulsion of Scotti who had settled in Wales, and some scholars have suggested that Cunedda was brought from Scotland to end the Irish settlements.² Collingwood, for instance, put forward the proposal that Cunedda and his 'tribe' were *foederati*, that is to say allied barbarians, transferred as an act of frontier policy to reinforce the defences of Wales at the end of the fourth century (Collingwood & Myers 1937, 237–90; *see also below*). It was by no means uncommon in the late Roman period for barbarians to be moved from a frontier on which they presented a threat to another which they could help to defend: the late Roman sites at Cardiff, Caer Gybi (Holyhead), and perhaps Hen Waliau (Caernarfon)³ demonstrate there was a need to strengthen the coastal defences in Wales (as elsewhere in the province) towards the end of the Roman period.⁴ An alternative interpretation of the Cunedda story has been put forward by Frere, who prefers to credit the sub-Roman ruler Vortigern with this act of quasi-imperial policy *c* 430 (Frere 1987, 373–4 and 377 note 34). These differing interpretations demonstrate the uncertainty that exists concerning the date of Cunedda's reported migration, and also raise other issues of some interest to the historian of Roman and sub-Roman Britain. Did this folk movement actually take place, and if so, when and in what form? What or who prompted Cunedda's journey to north Wales? The purpose of this note is to re-examine these questions, insofar as the limited evidence permits, and to assess the relevance of the story to the history of the closing years of Roman Britain.

The first and fundamental question concerns the historicity of the Cunedda story. The primary source, the *Historia Brittonum*, is the obvious place to begin the enquiry. This tells us that Cunedda was accompanied by eight of his sons. Their names, with that of the eldest son who died in Scotland, are given by a genealogy of mid-tenth century date probably compiled at St David's *c* 955 (*see* Gruffydd 1989–90, 3); these are, in virtually all instances, linked with the names of the kingdoms, subkingdoms, and *cantrefi* of north and west Wales, and from this it can be concluded that the account of Cunedda is not a record of historical fact, but rather a foundation legend of a commonly-encountered type, put together long after the foundation of Gwynedd to account for its existence (Chadwick

1958, 32–4; cf Chadwick 1949, 81–2 and Anderson 1980, 79–80 for a very similar foundation legend among the Picts). Dumville has remarked à propos of Cunedda that ‘modern constructs of migration from *Manau* to Gwynedd are perfectly incredible’ (1977, 181–3), but Miller on the other hand suggests that such a foundation legend may have some historical basis in fact (1978, 515; cf Frere 1987, *loc cit*). Unless what she terms a ‘unique’ foundation legend (as distinct from one based on common form) is a complete invention, it should yield some usable evidence concerning the persons and events it purports to record. External evidence will assist in this process, if it confirms some part of the story; but it must be admitted that at the simplest level of corroboration Cunedda is not mentioned in any source other than the *Historia Brittonum* and the genealogies. However, as it seems likely that genuine historical traditions and genealogies began to be preserved in Celtic Britain soon after the end of the Roman period (Chadwick 1958, 35), the Cunedda story may well have been of some antiquity when the *Historia Brittonum* was written or copied in 829–30.⁵ The possibility that the foundation legend relating to Gwynedd may distantly echo actual events in the late Roman period should not, therefore, be rejected out of hand.

Who was Cunedda? He is said to have come from *Manau Guotodin*, this form of the name being adopted to avoid confusion with the Isle of Man. In point of fact, the second element of the name provides a significant pointer to Cunedda’s origins, for it undoubtedly derives from the tribal name of the Votadini, known in Welsh literature as the *Gododdin* (Jackson 1963, 30–1). The Votadini appear in Ptolemy’s *Geography* of the mid-second century (II,3,7): their territory apparently extended from Tyne or Wear in the south to the Forth estuary.⁶ Place-name evidence suggests that *Manau* (alt *Mano* or *Manu*) lay at the north-western end of Votadinian territory, for the Annals of Ulster and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle report a battle on the ‘Plain of *Mano*’ between the rivers Avon and Carron.⁷ The extent of *Manau* is also indicated by two names which derive from it: Slamannan (= Hill or Moor of *Manau*) near the Avon, and Clackmannan (= Stone of *Manau*) on the northern side of Forth (Watson 1926, 103); it may well have extended as far as Stirling (Rivet & Smith 1979, 509) (see III III.1). A third name, Cremannan, is not thought to be relevant. The meaning of the name is unknown, as is its derivation, although it may be that in some sense the name reflects the character of this region which has been of strategic importance at all times in Scotland’s history: it should be noted that the eastern part of the Antonine Wall crossed the ‘plain of *Mano*’. Part of *Manau* clearly lay within Votadinian territory, but the remainder, and in particular the lands beyond the Forth, apparently did not. It may be noted at this point that the general consensus of opinion is that, of the tribes of southern Scotland, the Votadini are the most likely to have been philo-Roman (Frere 1987, 126, 176; Maxwell 1989, 76–7). The putative tribal *caput* at Traprain Law has produced a quantity of Roman finds, which tends to confirm this view, although the late Roman finds include a great amount of silver plate looted from the Roman province, and this has raised doubts as to the loyalties of the Votadinian tribesmen north of Cheviot in the later fourth century (Salway 1981, 386).

Cunedda’s place of origin in central Scotland having been defined, it is possible to return to the question: ‘who was he?’ It may be significant that the three ancestors immediately preceding Cunedda in the pedigrees bear recognisably Roman names. His



III.1 Map showing places mentioned in the text

father was Ederne (= Aeternus) and his great-grandfather was Tacit or Tegit (= Tacitus), whilst his grandfather was Padarn (= Paternus) Pesrut. The cognomen 'Pe(i)srut' is translated as 'Red Tunic' or 'Red Cloak': whatever the precise meaning, the fact that he wore such a distinctive garment has been taken to show that Paternus had been accorded Roman office or authority (Frere 1987, 341). The adoption of Roman names, and even the vestments of Roman power, has also been held to indicate increasing Roman influence among the native peoples of southern Scotland in the fourth century. The context for such a process could, it has been suggested, have been the creation of an outer line of defence against the Picts, broadly based on the Forth-Clyde isthmus, requiring alliances with tribes like the Votadini under chieftains like Paternus (Richmond ed 1940, 112–16; Hogg 1948, 204; Blair 1947, 32–4). A similar process has been postulated for Strathclyde, where Coroticus's father was Cinhil and his grandfather Cluim, names construed as deriving from Quintillus and Clemens respectively. However, Jackson (1955, 80) has expressed

reservations about these supposed derivations and has cast doubts on the case as a whole. Whilst Cunedda himself bore a Celtic name, two of his sons (Dunod and Edern) and a grandson had Roman names; it is also possibly significant that Cunedda's forbears before Tacitus had names with apparently Pictish connotations (Chadwick 1949, 149; Alcock 1971, 128). In short, it may be doubted whether the appearance of Roman names in Cunedda's pedigree is evidence for advancing Roman influence in lowland Scotland in the fourth century, still less for the granting of federate status to the Votadini; Mann (1974, 42) has pointed out that in fact such names enjoyed little popularity among barbarians beyond the frontiers until the coming of Christianity.

The proposed association of Cunedda and his immediate ancestors with Roman authority has made the episode of his transfer from Scotland to Wales of some interest to historians of Roman Britain. The date of this event is therefore a crucial issue, and at first sight the evidence in this respect is conclusive. The *Historia Brittonum* dates the migration precisely, and in unequivocal terms, as 146 years before Maelgwn of Gwynedd reigned. Maelgwn probably succeeded to the throne in 534, and Cunedda therefore left *Manau* for Wales c 388, the year of Magnus Maximus's defeat and execution. It has been suggested that prior to removing much of the British garrison to fight for him on the continent, Maximus made provision for Britain's defence through the use of friendly tribes like the Votadini under such leaders as Cunedda (Hogg 1948, 203–4). Acceptance of this superficially attractive theory is hindered by a significant discrepancy between the *Historia Brittonum*, which refers to Cunedda as Maelgwn's grandfather's great-grandfather (*atavus*), and the genealogies, in which he is Maelgwn's great-grandfather (*proavus*),⁸ and this idea is therefore not now generally accepted. As noted above, Frere assigns Cunedda to the post-Roman period, whilst using the legend and genealogies as evidence for late Roman frontier policy in the north – a line of argument which itself is questionable, as we have seen.

At this stage it is fair to comment that when it is subjected to critical appraisal the Cunedda story is revealed as too brief, chronologically uncertain and vague to support the various interpretations placed on it by successive scholars of Roman Britain from Collingwood onwards. The foundation legend and genealogies, which are not in accord, may not be complete fabrications put together for dynastic purposes (although that must remain a real possibility), but lack of independent corroboration, together with other doubts and reservations discussed above, raises serious questions as to the degree of credence which can be accorded them, despite a very natural reluctance to dismiss a potentially valuable source of evidence relating to the closing years of Roman Britain and the emergence of the British kingdoms of the post-Roman period.

A way out of the impasse has been proposed by Miller (1978, 529–30). She suggests that the passage relating to Cunedda may be an annotation to the main text in the *Historia* which, if removed, would make it read: 'Maelgwn the great king was reigning among the Britons, that is, in the region of Gwynedd because his grandfather's great-grandfather [annotation concerning Cunedda inserted here] had formerly come from the north, that is, from the region called *Manau Gododdin*, a hundred and forty-six years before Maelgwn was in consequence to reign ...' This removes the problem of the conflicting chronologies, and incidentally places the migration in the late Roman period. The migrant from *Manau*

is no longer Cunedda, however, but his grandfather Paternus son of Tacitus = Padarn Pesrut. This being so, Cunedda's role in the formation of the kingdom of Gwynedd was probably in guiding its consolidation in the mid-fifth century.⁹ Acceptance of Miller's solution restores an event of some interest in the later fourth century, and to that extent it is worth enquiring as to the circumstances of Paternus's translation from *Manau* to Gwynedd. Since Cunedda and his sons are no longer of relevance the case for mass migration is weakened, although it is unlikely that Paternus journeyed alone. Whilst any central authority was functioning no barbarian group could have entered or crossed the Roman diocese without official cognisance and consent, whatever its composition or purpose. The date of Paternus's arrival in Wales is not firmly fixed, despite the seeming precision of the source (Miller 1978, 530). Nevertheless, it seems probable that it took place some time during the last quarter of the fourth century, that is to say whilst Roman administration was still functioning.

The exclusive attention given to putative Votadinian *foederati* in the past has tended to obscure the point that there were other relationships between the Roman authorities and barbarian warriors. It was a long-standing tradition of the Roman army to recruit *auxilia* from among the non-citizen peoples of the empire, as in Gaul and Spain, and also from barbarians beyond the frontiers like the Batavians and Germans. As with the Batavians there were a number of instances in which peoples outside the empire supplied the Romans with recruits under treaty obligations, often following their defeat in battle. Cohorts and *alae* bearing the names of barbarian peoples or tribes were therefore commonly found in the Roman army, and the practice continued after Diocletian's reforms well into the fourth century; in some cases such units served under their own tribal leaders.¹⁰ Prisoners of war and *dediticii* (those who submitted unconditionally to Rome) were also recruited, and recruits were forcibly levied from defeated barbarian peoples as a condition of peace, an instance being the transfer of 5500 Sarmatians to Britain in AD 175 following a Sarmatian defeat and the ensuing treaty (Dio lxii, xvi). When the Roman defences in the west began to disintegrate in the fourth century, bands of federate barbarians were recruited en masse into the Roman army and graded as *auxilia*. Usually these were placed under Roman officers, and administered by Roman quartermasters, but in some instances they may have been led by officers who, judging by their names, were not Roman.¹¹

Finally, it should be noted that settlements of barbarian militia termed *laeti* were made in various provinces on land specially allotted for the purpose, which the *laeti* were expected to defend. It is thought that Saxon *laeti* may have been settled in East Anglia in the late third or early fourth century;¹² such *laeti* would have been administered by *praefecti* who would have been listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum* independently of the *Dux Britanniarum*. Unfortunately the list of *laeti* and *gentiles* in the *Notitia* breaks off before it reaches Britain.

That units of the *auxilia* were recruited from among the peoples of Britain is attested from the Flavian period onwards (British *auxilia* were present at the battle of Mons Graupius: Tacitus *Agricola*, xxxii), and ten or more British units are known to have been serving on the German *limes* in the Trajanic period. The latest known instance of units of *auxilia* being formed in Britain as that of the Attacotti, a people who joined with the Picts

and Scotti in troubling the province from the mid-fourth century.¹³ The *Notitia Dignitatum* records four units of Attacotti scattered across the empire, any or all of which may be presumed to have been forcibly recruited among prisoners of war or *dediticii*, perhaps after successful naval activity in northern Britain by Theodosius (Frere 1987, 392; see also Miller 1978, 520 note 3).

From this brief survey it will be seen that more than one explanation might be found for the presence of tribesmen from central Scotland in north Wales in the latter years of the fourth century. The Roman army may have been provided with Votadinian recruits through long-standing treaty arrangements, or alternatively arising from terms imposed on the Votadini following their defeat during Roman campaigning in the north in the later fourth century, although the *auxilia* contain no known Votadinian units. To adopt the latter solution would be to suppose that the Votadini were not at all times the friends of Rome, and it was noted above that it is possible to question assumptions as to their loyalty towards the end of the Roman period (Salway 1981, 386; Mann 1974, 42). If we may suppose that the Votadini were uncertain in their allegiance at that time, it is but a short step to proposing that men from this tribe, either prisoners of war or *dediticii*, could have been formed into a unit of *auxilia* and then posted to Wales. If so, they will have been constituted into a *numerus* under a Roman officer. Alternatively, whilst it may seem *prima facie* unlikely, it is not impossible that some part of the tribe of the Votadini was transferred as *laeti* to defend part of north or west Wales following withdrawal of the regular garrisons. Unfortunately, the absence of Wales from the *Notitia Dignitatum* deprives us of information about its late Roman garrison. Finally, there exists the preferred option for previous enquirers, that Cunedda and his 'band' were *foederati*.

To summarise, critical examination of the evidence relating to the story of Cunedda suggests that, if such a movement took place, it was not he but his grandfather, Padarn Pesrut (= Paternus Taciti f) who led it. Notions of folk movements, or the deployment of *foederati*, may therefore be mistaken, and other alternative circumstances deserve due consideration. However, it is necessary at this point to reiterate that the primary source for the story is no more than a foundation legend: the evidence it gives us is slight and uncertain, and cannot be relied upon too heavily. Whilst not capable of precise dating, this reported event almost certainly belongs to the period from the mid-fourth century to the opening years of the fifth century, in effect from the events leading up to the *barbarica conspiratio* to the aftermath of the Second Pictish War and reorganisation of Britain's defences by Stilicho, with perhaps the balance of probabilities favouring the latter rather than the former.¹⁴

It will be noted that the issue of Paternus's origins has been evaded. He is said to have come from that part of *Manau* that was Votadinian, from which it might be reasonable to conclude that both he and those who accompanied him were Votadini. This point perhaps merits a little further consideration, however, for some difficulties arise in adopting such a simple explanation. The deployment of Votadinian warriors in Wales, whether as *auxilia*, *foederati*, or *laeti*, would have entailed a potential weakening of the northern frontier at a critical time when we know that it was under considerable pressure from the Picts. Whatever the situation may have been in Wales, we know that from the later third century the Picts posed an increasing threat to the security of the Roman diocese, and by

the latter part of the fourth century had become the greatest single threat to it (Alcock 1980, 7–8; 1979, 61). In these circumstances it seems unlikely that a useful buffer state in the north would have been weakened in the interests of strengthening the defences of Wales. Is it conceivable that the warriors sent to Gwynedd were not in fact Votadini but Picts, constituted into a unit of *auxilia* on Votadinian territory from men recruited, possibly as *dediticii*, in the other part of *Manau*? By the late fourth century the southern boundary of Pictland extended approximately to the line formerly occupied by the Antonine Wall, so that the northern part of *Manau* may by this time be assigned to Pictland. Paternus's ancestors beyond his father bear names which suggest that his family may have been Pictish, for they have been likened to a Pictish king-list (Chadwick, 1949, 3–4 and 73. The names are linked in pairs). If we concede, for the sake of argument, that Paternus was an historical person, his possession of nomen and cognomen need not imply that his romanity was more than skin deep. Equally, the foundation legend does not prove that he was a Votadinian chief, although during the fourth century the empire employed many officers of barbarian origin, some of whom rose to very high rank in Britain and elsewhere (for example, Fullofaudes, whose name is hardly Roman, was *Dux Britanniarum* in 367) including some who were recruited from among the ranks of its enemies. It is an intriguing thought (albeit possibly a mistaken one) that a leader of that warlike people, the Picts, might have contributed to the foundation of the kingdom of Gwynedd.

What can be said in conclusion? Perhaps no more than that the foundation legend relating to Gwynedd suggests the possibility that a body of northern warriors from *Manau* on the marches of Pictland were brought to north Wales under a Roman officer, or at least by a man with a Roman name who wore a Roman uniform. When this happened cannot be determined with precision, but may be assumed to have occurred in the period from the mid-fourth century to the opening years of the fifth century, that is to say whilst southern Britain still remained part of the Roman empire. From a tiny acorn set at that time may have grown the mighty oak of medieval Gwynedd.

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NOTES

- 1 Cunedda may be the British Cunedagus, 'Good Lord' (Jackson 1963, 30) or 'Good Chief' (Williams 1952, 78; Thomas 1991–2, 8). The name is variously spelt Cunedda, Cuneda, and Cunedag; the first of these is the most commonly used form, and is therefore adopted here. The fourth- or fifth-century form would have been *CUNEDAGUS or similar.
- 2 (*Scotti expulsi sunt a Cunedda et a filiis eius ab omnibus regionibus brytannicis* (Dumville ed 1985, 69; Morris 1980). There is little evidence for Irish settlements in Wales before the fifth century.
- 3 Nash-Williams 1969, 63, 70–3, 135–7; Livens 1986, 58–9; Boyle 1991, 191–212; RCAHM Wales 1937 31–4; Frere ed 1977, 360; Goodburn ed 1976, 298; 1978, 408; 1979, 273; Grew ed 1980, 349; 1981, 316; Rankov ed 1982, 331.
- 4 The *Notitia Dignitatum* lists no forts in Wales, and the composition of its garrison in the late Roman period is therefore uncertain.
- 5 The spelling Cunedag was fixed by the middle of the eighth century and probably earlier, and a written source for the *Historia Brittonum* using that form will have existed (Jackson 1963, 30; Miller 1978, 528–9).
- 6 Rivet & Smith 1982, 508–9. However Gordon Maxwell has expressed (*in litt*) the strongest reservation about the use of Ptolemy to determine the frontiers of Votadinia, or any other tribal territory.
- 7 Both sources date the battle to 711. The entry in the Ulster Annals refers to *strages Pictorum in campo Mannan*.
- 8 The latter term was still being used correctly (on the Pillar of Eliseg) in the first half of the ninth century. *Atavus* can also be used in the general sense of 'ancestor', but the more precise meaning was almost certainly intended here.
- 9 Two distinct traditions about the foundation of Gwynedd were apparently conflated. The Cunedda legend forms part of a passage in the *Historia* which is principally concerned with the reign of Ida of Bernicia. Miller's suggestion is based on stylistic grounds: the annotation reveals a different level of Latinity from the main text.
- 10 Fraomar, an Alamannic king, was sent to Britain in 372 to take command of a *numerus* of his fellow countrymen in the regular *auxilia*: see Ammianus xxix, iv, 7.
- 11 An Alamannic chief, Crocus, who commanded a cohort of Alamanni in Britain, played a significant role in Constantine I's accession (Aurelius Victor *Epitome de Caesaribus* xli.3).
- 12 *Laeti* may have been settled in the vicinity of Venta Icenorum as early as the late third century (Frere 1987, 270 note 5). The suggestion that Saxon *laeti* garrisoned the Saxon Shore has not met with general acceptance (White 1961, 82).
- 13 They participated in the barbarian *conspiratio* of 367 and were presumably actively hostile before that date. They may have inhabited the western Highlands, the Hebrides, or both. Richmond (1958, 128) believed that units of Attacotti may have been raised by Magnus Maximus.
- 14 Miller has concluded that, of the various dates available for the appearance of a northern incomer in Wales, the most likely is the aftermath of the second Pictish war c 400. Stilicho must have gained a considerable victory over the Picts and other barbarians; see Miller 1975, 141–5; Thomas 1991–2, 8.

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