IV

THE END OF CELTIC BRITAIN: A SIXTH-CENTURY BATTLE NEAR LINDISFARNE

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SUMMARY

This paper examines what is known about the circumstances of the death of Urien, king of Rheged, with the aim of shedding light not only on the death of that major figure but also on the circumstances which allowed the Anglian conquest of Northumberland, despite its rather inauspicious beginning. I have discussed the passage in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* which refers to Urien's death, looking at Jackson's arguments for its historicity and showing that the apparent difficulty about his mention of the Anglian kings Hussa and Theodric is easily resolved. I have also examined briefly the English and Welsh genealogical evidence, the mentions of relevant events in the *Annales Cambriae*, and the evidence of tradition as expressed in the poems of Taliesin, the Welsh *Triads*, and the poems known as *Canu Llywarch Hen*.

After a brief explanation of what is known about the major figures mentioned, I have discussed the arguments for different dates of the battle, and shown that the usual date of *c.* 570 is based on a misconception, and should more probably be *c.* 590. Finally I have discussed briefly who killed Urien, showing that there is no essential contradiction between the claims of Morgant and Llofan as murderer, and at greater length the possible reasons for this killing. Here I have shown that the background of North Britain was one of bickering between British kingdoms, and that it was this endemic disunity which led to the defeat of the British.

SOMETIME IN the second half of the sixth century the Anglians of Bernicia were besieged on Lindisfarne by a coalition of Celtic rulers; their final expulsion seems to have been prevented by dissension among the British and the murder of one of the leaders. This much is accepted by most scholars of the period, but never amplified; F. M. Stenton, for example, merely comments that this explains the paucity of Anglian burial-grounds of the pagan period to be found in the interior of Northumberland.[1] Yet the understanding of these events is surely important for our under-

[1] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford 1971), p. 76.

standing of the end of Britain and the beginning of England; for had the Bernicians been driven away (and it seems that the British may well have had the strength to do that) the whole history of North Britain must have been very different. It is not impossible to make some attempt to understand and amplify the events as they are usually recorded, but to do so involves going beyond what may strictly be called history into the survivals of literary and oral tradition—survivals which are to be found amongst the Celts rather than amongst the Anglo-Saxons. It requires also the assessment of such evidence as has survived from a neutral standpoint, rather than from within any single discipline; a task which I, being as poor a Celticist as a scholar of Anglo-Saxon, and having long since relinquished any pretensions to being a historian, am admirably qualified to undertake.

(1) *The evidence*

Although I shall be arguing about the importance of tradition, the basic evidence—indeed the only explicit statement—is contained in a work which at least attempts to be historical: Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*. In chapter 63 is the following passage:

> Hussa regnavit annis septem. Contra illum quattuor reges, Urbgen et Riderc Hen et Guallauc et Morcant dimicaverunt. Deodric contra illum Urbgen cum filiis dimicabat fortiter—in illo autem tempore aliquando hostes, nunc cives vincebantur. Et ipse conclusit eos tribus diebus et noctibus in insula Metcaud, et, dum erat in expeditione, iugulatus est, Morcanto destinante pro invidia, quia in ipso prae omnibus regibus virtus maxima erat instauratione belli.[2]

Nennius was writing in the ninth century about events which took place towards the end of the sixth, and unless some sort of continuity between the two can be established his story would merit very little consideration. K. H. Jackson has made a considerable study of the Northern British section in Nennius, chapters 57 to 65.[3] He argues that on the English side Nennius's sources were a Mercian original of the genealogies in MS Cotton Vespasian B VI, f 108ff and a document which Jackson calls the "Northern History"; this latter he regards as a history formed by combining Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* with some notes on Northern history to be found at the end of the Moore manuscript of Bede and known as the "Moore Memoranda". As Bede finished writing in 731, and as the Moore Memoranda have been shown by Peter Hunter Blair to date from 737,[4] this Northern History may well have been written in the 730s. Professor Jackson also argues that the genealogies of the Vespasian MS, which must date from about 812, are an updating of the original Mercian document which he claims—convincingly—was written in the 780s or 790s.

[2] *Historia Brittonum*, ed. T. Mommsen: *Chronica Minora Saeculi IV–VII*, vol. III pp. 111ff, Berlin, 1898.

[3] K. H. Jackson, "On the Northern British section in Nennius", in Jackson *et al.*, *Celt and Saxon: studies in the early British border* (Cambridge 1963), pp. 20–62.

[4] P. H. Blair, "The Moore Memoranda on Northumbrian History", in *Early Cultures of North West Europe*, ed. C. Fox and B. Dickins (Cambridge 1950), pp. 243–59.

R. W. Chambers has argued on internal evidence that Vespasian was derived from a source put in writing in the reign of Ecgfrith of Northumbria (670–685), in which he was following Zimmer;[5] however this argument has been refuted by the work of Sisam.[6] Similarly, an attempt by Zimmer to date the Moore Memoranda *c.* 679[7] has been shown to be incorrect.[8]

This puts some 150 or 200 years between Nennius's sources and the events they record. However, they are not necessarily inaccurate; they are genealogical and dynastic records, and in oral or semi-oral societies the accurate preservation of such information is accorded great importance. P. Hunter Blair has argued for the accuracy of genealogies in general, and elsewhere for that of the regnal lists, which seem to have been used by Bede also.[9] A small problem in the case of the early history of Bernicia is that the genealogies and the regnal lists do not appear to agree. The genealogies (working backwards) give: Eðelfrið Eðelricing. Eðelric Iding. Ida Eopping; the regnal lists give the succession as: Ida, Glappa, Adda, Æthelric, Theodric, Friduuald, Hussa, Æthelfrith. However, these are not incompatible: if some of the kings were usurpers, or even brothers of the others, they could well have been omitted from a genealogy concerned to establish the lineage of a particular later figure rather than with drawing up a family tree. The discrepancy between the genealogies and the regnal lists may help to explain the peculiar passage in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which describes the succession in Deira as being Ælle (560–588), Æthelric (588–593) and Æthelfrith (acceded 593).[10] The fact that 593 is the date of Æthelfrith's accession in Bernicia, not Deira, shows that there has been some confusion; if Æthelric's dates have been computed by subtracting his regnal years immediately from Æthelfrith's on the basis of the genealogies, the whole thing may be an unreliable mess, and there would be no need to postulate two Æthelrics (one of Bernicia and one of Deira) as P. Hunter Blair does.[11]

D. P. Kirby points out some other discrepancies between the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the Moore Memoranda, on which basis he suggests that the latter represents a conflation of the Bernician and Deiran lines and is thus not to be trusted.[12] His argument is quite convincing, but although Nennius is clearly following the Moore Memoranda in his chapter 63 both traditions seem to be agreed on the date and position in the succession of Hussa who, as I shall show below, is the most important figure.

Nennius was also using a British source, as is indicated by the use of British names for places and battles, a British nickname for Æthelfrith, and certain items such as the attribution of the baptism of Edwin to Rhun, a Celt, rather than to Paulinus

[5] R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: an introduction* (Cambridge 1921), p. 196; Zimmer, *Nennius Vindicatus* (Berlin 1893), p. 78.

[6] K. Sisam, "Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies", *Proc. Br. Acad.* XXXIX (1953), p. 294.

[7] Zimmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 95 f.

[8] F. Lot, *Nennius et l'Historia Brittonum* (Paris 1934), p. 205 n. 5; Jackson, *Celt and Saxon*, pp. 25–26.

[9] P. H. Blair, "The origins of Northumbria", *Archaeologia Aeliana* XXV (1947) 1–51, p. 30; "The Bernicians and their northern frontier", in H. M. Chadwick *et al.*, *Studies in Early British History* (Cambridge 1954)—hereafter *S.E.B.H.*—137–72, pp. 140–41.

[10] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, tr. G. N. Garmonsway (London 1953), pp. 18, 20.

[11] Blair, *S.E.B.H.*, p. 152.

[12] D. P. Kirby, "Bede and Northumbrian chronology", *E.H.R.* 78 (1963), 523 ff.

as in Bede. The nature and reliability of this source is also discussed by Professor Jackson, who points out that the form of many of the names shows that they appeared in written form at an early date: the form *Cunedag* with the final *g*, for example, suggests a date in the middle of the eighth century at the latest.[13] As to the form of the source, Lot believed it was British poems in the first place, thinking no doubt of the material discussed below.[14] P. Hunter Blair makes the same assumption:

> The reference to Taliesin and the other Welsh bards, to the treacherous killing of Urien and to the siege of Lindisfarne point to Welsh heroic poetry rather than to an annalistic chronicle as the source of the Welsh material.[15]

However, Welsh heroic poetry—at least as represented by the Llywarch Hen poems discussed below—gives no real hint of treachery in Urien's slaying, and like the Triads gives the name of his killer as Llofan Llaw Difro rather than Morcant.[16] Moreover, as Professor Jackson points out, heroic poetry knows only of a Rhydderch *Hael*, rather than the Riderc *Hen* of Nennius. Thus although the poetic tradition may lie behind some elements in the *Historia Brittonum* there must have been material from another tradition also.

Jackson sees this as being marginal notes to Paschal tables drawn up in a North British monastery, and later made into a "Northern Chronicle" used not only by Nennius but also by the compiler of the *Annales Cambriae*. Mrs. Chadwick suggests that such a "Northern Chronicle" may have been drawn up in the seventh century.[17] If so, its date of compilation is reasonably close to the date of the events it records, while if it was based on entries in Paschal tables its own sources were contemporary.

It is worth noting, and remembering when considering the passage in Nennius, that the *Annales Cambriae* and probably therefore its source is heavily biased towards events in Rheged (Cumbria). This is suggested partly by the omissions, such as the *obit* of Rhydderch, and partly by the inclusion of such traditions as the baptism of Edwin by Rhun, son of Urien king of Rheged.[18] This, as noted above, is to be found in Nennius also, as is a tradition that Oswy had two wives, the first being Rieinmelt, granddaughter of this same Rhun. This has provoked the suggestion that the "Northern Chronicle" was perhaps compiled by Rhun himself, who would seem to have entered the Church at some stage.[19] If this were the case, the information would of course be highly accurate; but unfortunately it can remain only a speculation. The bias towards Rheged is, however, important to bear in mind; and it is also quite clear that Nennius's sources on both British and English sides are reasonably trustworthy.

[13] Jackson, *Celt and Saxon* p. 45; *Language and history in Early Britain* (Edinburgh 1953), p. 458.

[14] Lot, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 ff.

[15] Blair, *S.E.B.H.*, p. 152.

[16] Cf. N. K. Chadwick, "Early culture and learning in North Wales", in Chadwick *et al.*, *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cambridge 1958)—hereafter *S.E.B.C.*—29–120, p. 72.

[17] *Ibid.* pp. 46 ff.

[18] Cf. *ibid.* pp. 66, 72. The entry about Rhun is contained in the "A" text (Harleian MS 3859) only, the "B" text giving Bede's version of baptism by Paulinus.

[19] *Ibid.* p. 72; Thurneysen's review of Zimmer's *Nennius Vindicatus* in *Zeit. f. deut. Phil.* XXVIII (1896), p. 85.

Besides Nennius, the Vespasian Genealogies, the Moore Memoranda, and the *Annales Cambriae*, the other evidence is to be found in British (i.e. Welsh) literature. Here there is less to discuss about the authority of the works. Orthography is the main basis of dating, and shows some works (notably the Taliesin poems) to be of considerable antiquity; but in general it is agreed that the texts we possess are the literary product at the end of an oral tradition. In a society adapted to the oral preservation of "history", the standards of accuracy are usually high; indeed, this is so even where recognisably fictional stories are concerned, as work with Irish story-tellers has demonstrated.[20] There is thus no justification for assuming that this Welsh poetry is only pleasant fiction which can shed no light on actual events.

First among these texts must come the poems of Taliesin, whose name is actually mentioned by Nennius in another part of the North British section. There is a collection of poems known as the "Book of Taliesin", which in its present form (Peniarth MS 2) was written down *c.* 1275, and which contains over 50 poems. Perhaps not unnaturally, most of these have no connection at all with the historical Taliesin; instead, they are part of a saga, the *Hanes Taliesin*, about a shape-shifting youth who becomes a wonder-working child, prophesying all manner of things. Those poems which can properly be regarded as the work of Taliesin, that is, those whose language and style date them to the late sixth century in origin, have been edited by Sir Ifor Williams.[21] Unfortunately they do not consist of a coherent narrative, but of small vignettes of life in Rheged and the events of Urien's career—the description of a battle, the return of a war band, a panegyric on Urien's generosity. Nor do they contain any mention of the death of Urien, although there is an elegy to his son, Owein. Their importance in this study lies in the information they can give us about the background.

Also concerned with the background, and of use in dating the battle with which I am concerned, are the Welsh genealogies, the earliest of which are contained in the same twelfth-century manuscript as the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* (Harleian 8359).[22] P. C. Bartrum suggests that they actually date from the same period as the *Annales*, the mid-tenth century. A full description of the manuscript and discussion of the dates of it and its contents was given by Egerton Phillimore.[23] There are also a number of manuscripts of later date, some of which may be independent of the Harleian genealogies; the exact interrelations of the manuscripts have yet to be fully explored. The genealogies of Urien, Rhydderch and Gwallawg are fairly constant in the various versions (although some of Urien's sons, such as Elffin, may be late and spurious graftings onto his stock); the possible candidates for Nennius's Morcant are discussed below. Although like the Anglo-Saxon genealogies these were written down some time after the death of the persons named in them, we must again be prepared to accept that such records will have

[20] J. H. Delargy, "The Gaelic story-teller", *Proc. Br. Acad.* 31 (1945) 177–221, p. 182.

[21] English edition by J. E. C. Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin* (Dublin 1968). The arguments for the date will be found in the introduction, and also in I. Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin 1944), Lecture III. Cf. the arguments for the date of Aneirin, K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin* (Edinburgh 1969), pp. 86 ff.

[22] All the surviving genealogies are edited by P. C. Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff 1966).

[23] Y Cymmrodor 9 (1888), 141–153.

been preserved with reasonable accuracy in a tradition at least partially oral.

Very definitely a part of the oral tradition are the triads, a collection of names or events grouped in threes presumably for aiding oral preservation. The earliest manuscript, Peniarth MS 16, seems to date from the thirteenth century, although it shows traces in its orthography of being based on a manuscript of the same period as the Black Book of Carmarthen (*c.* 1180–1220).[24] In oral form, it is quite clear that some of the triads go back at least to the ninth or tenth century,[25] and probable that they preserve traditions of an earlier period still. Five triads mention Urien: he is a Pillar of Battle in no. 5, a Warrior-Protector (possibly) in no. 6, a Battle Leader in no. 25, and one of the Three Fair Womb Burdens in no. 70; and in no. 33 one of the Three Unfortunate Assassinations is his slaying by Llofan Llaw Difro. The other three kings of the coalition are also mentioned in various triads, and they also contain frustratingly enigmatic references to background information which is relevant to this discussion.

Finally there is a group of poems in which the speaker purports to be Llywarch Hen, a cousin of Urien of Rheged.[26] For some time it was believed—or hoped—that they were written by Llywarch himself, although since they seem in the main to concern the defence of the Morlas ford on the borders of Wales, it is hard to see what relevance they could have had to one of the Gwŷr y Gogledd, the Men of the North. Sir Ifor Williams has since shown that they belong to a ninth-century saga of Llywarch.[27] The sections which concern Urien are in section III of Williams's edition, and apart from elegies over the head and the body of Urien, and a description of the ruined hearth of Rheged, contain an account of a fight in which Urien is killed, and at which Morcant is present (englynion 37–46). It is clear that this is the least reliable of all our sources of information, and that such actual events as are mentioned have been embroidered and altered. Nevertheless, they presumably embody some sort of folk-memory of the death of Urien, and as such may have a little light to shed if used carefully.

(ii) *The people*

The Nennius passage mentions two Anglo-Saxon kings, Theodric and Hussa. According to both Nennius and the Moore Memoranda Theodric reigned first and there was one king (Friduuald, reigned six years) between them. Using the Moore Memoranda and the known date of the accession of Æthelfrith, Theodric reigned *c.* 572–579 and Hussa *c.* 585–592; it is clear that the dating of the battle will be in part dependent upon which of these kings was besieged in Lindisfarne. The question arises because most commentators have read the passage to mean that Theodric was the unfortunate king. P. Hunter Blair simply states this as fact;[28] Professor Jackson

[24] *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, ed. R. S. Bromwich (Cardiff 1961), p. xix.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. cvii–cxxi.

[26] *Canu Llywarch Hen*, ed. I. Williams, (Caerdydd 1935).

[27] *Ibid.*, introduction; I. Williams, *Lectures*, Lecture II.

[28] *S.E.B.H.*, p. 151.

points out that there is a difficulty, and that either Nennius got his chronology wrong (the view to which he inclines) or that Urien fought against both, fighting Hussa before he became king.[29] He inclines to the former explanation because the later date would help to explain the lateness of the Bernician expansion.

I also believe in the later date, and that Hussa was being attacked at the time of Urien's death, on what seems to me the perfectly adequate ground that it is what Nennius says. I find no need to juggle with chronology or explain away "in illo tempore" as referring to the entire period of the reign of Ida's sons. Nennius begins with a plain statement that Hussa reigned for seven years and that four kings fought against him. He then names them, and then I think gives in parenthesis a little further information about one of them, Urien: namely, that Theodric fought bravely against that Urien and his sons but (surely this is the force of *autem*?) in *that* time the battle went first one way then the other. This statement is in contrast to the very one-sided nature of the Lindisfarne siege which he then goes on to describe. *Ipse* in the next line is confusing, since it refers back to Urien in the first sentence rather than in the parenthesis (it is in any case rather confusing, since the two most obvious names for it to refer to syntactically are Theodric or Hussa). It could also be claimed that my reading requires the verb *dimicabat* to be in the pluperfect, *dimicaverat*; but do even Classical authors always follow the strict order of tenses in their parentheses? It seems clear that the besieged Anglo-Saxon king is Hussa, and that this passage implies that he is not quite the fighter that Theodric was. Kirby's reversal of the reigns of Theodric and Hussa, which rests solely on the supposed evidence of Nennius, is thus unnecessary.

Urbgen is Urien, king of Rheged, as Professor Jackson has shown.[30] The exact borders of this kingdom have never been established, and it is likely that they were rather fluid in the sixth century anyway. From such evidence of place-names as we have, it would seem to have been based on Carlisle, to have included the Lake District and part of north Lancashire, to have extended westward at least into and perhaps to the far side of the Pennines, and to have had Catraeth (Catterick in Yorkshire) as its south-eastern outpost.[31] It is interesting that this area seems to bear some relation to that occupied by the Brigantes in the Roman period; it is perhaps just possible that Urien was some sort of Brigantean High King, with under-chieftains below him, in the manner of an Irish province-king.[32] This idea is the more attractive since Rheged seems a very large area in sixth-century terms to have been administered by one man living in its north-western corner.

Riderc Hen is undoubtedly the Rhydderch Hen of the genealogies and the Rhydderch Hael of the poetry, the king of Strathclyde.[33] It appears that his kingdom was based on the rock of Dumbarton, the only candidate for Adamnán's *petra Cloithe* (the rock of the Clyde);[34] probably the kingdom marched with Rheged in the south,

[29] Jackson, *Language and History*, pp. 707–08. See also Kirby, *E.H.R.* 78 pp. 525 f, who reverses Hussa and Theodric.

[30] Jackson, *Language and History*, p. 439.

[31] The evidence is discussed in *The Poems of Taliesin* (Williams), pp. xxxvi ff.

[32] See F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London 1973), pp. 41–2.

[33] *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, pp. 504–05.

[34] Adamnán, *Life of St. Columba*, ed. W. Reeves (Dublin 1857), I ch. 8.

but of its northern borders we have no note—they were probably in dispute with Scottish Dalriada. In the east it may have bordered Gododdin, of which more below. Rhydderch appears in the twelfth-century *Life of St. Kentigern* by Jocelyn of Furness[35] as the saint's patron, and the champion of Christianity in north Britain. He also appears in the poem *Afallenau* as the ruler whom Myrddin feared above all other people, and from whom he hid after the battle of Arfderydd (Arthuret). There is in fact no evidence to connect Rhydderch with this battle earlier than Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, which is scarcely reliable;[36] the fact that his name should have become associated with it proves that he was a major figure in the north.

In contrast, Gwallawg (Nennius's Guallauc) was king of a fairly small kingdom, Elmet around modern Leeds.[37] It is perhaps a little surprising to find him in this company, as his own kingdom would surely have been more threatened by Bernicia's more powerful southern neighbour, Deira, than by Bernicia itself. According to the genealogies Gwallawg was, like Urien, a descendant of Coel Hen; if the possibility of Urien's being a sort of high king is accepted, Gwallawg might have been a sub-king on whose aid he was entitled to call. (Equally, given Rheged's obvious power, Gwallawg might have been a weaker client-king whose foreign policy was dictated by his western neighbour.) The fact that in *Canu Llywarch Hen* Gwallawg appears as one of the enemies of Urien does not disprove either this theory or the validity of that poem; indeed, human nature being what it is it may even strengthen the theory—one is not unduly likely to be fond of one's overlords or one's more powerful cousins.

The fourth figure in the coalition is far more shadowy. There are three Morgants in the genealogies of the Men of the North. One is Morgant Mwynvawr who is given in Peniarth MS 127 as a brother of Rhydderch Hael. Little weight can be given to this relationship, both because of the lack of any independent mention of it in any of the other sources of information on Rhydderch and because it appears in a fairly late (*c.* 1510) adaptation of the *Bonedd Gwŷr y Gogledd.* Presumably, however, the association means that he was a northern figure. The other two Morgants appear in Harleian genealogy 10: Morgant Bulc and his grandson, Morgan map Coledauc.[38] Unfortunately, these genealogies give no indication of the territory over which they ruled, except that it was in the north; they are also given as descendants of Coel Hen. There is no real evidence to associate Nennius's Morcant with the Morken in the *Life of St. Kentigern* who persecutes the saint, as Jackson has shown;[39] but if as Dr. Bromwich has suggested the original of Nennius's figure has inspired the figure of Morken, he may have been part of an anti-Christian "party" in the North; it could also explain his association later with Rhydderch. John Morris has suggested that Morgant was the ruler of the area around Lindisfarne which the Angles were occupying, but he seems to do so solely on the grounds that it enables him

[35] *Lives of St. Ninian and St. Kentigern*, ed. A. P. Forbes (Edinburgh 1874), pp. 159 ff.

[36] *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 209.

[37] Jackson, *Celt and Saxon*, p. 31. expresses doubt about this attribution; however, the evidence quoted in *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* seems convincing enough. On the extent of Elmet see *Celt & Saxon*, p. 32; John James, "On the little British kingdom of Elmet", *J. Br. Arch. Assoc.* 20 (1864), 34–38.

[38] For a discussion of these various Morcants see *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 466.

[39] *S.E.B.C.*, pp. 312–13.

to explain the assassination of Urien by saying that the latter gave away Morgant's lands to his Irish allies.[40] Since his belief in these Irish allies rests upon two unnamed "Irish stories"; since the British sources make no reference to them; and since such records as exist seem to refer to an alliance between the Irish and Aedán mac Gabráin whose attack on Bernicia was later,[41] the argument as to Morgant's territory becomes non-existent.

Morgant could, of course, be the one ruler who is conspicuous by his absence, and whose absence would otherwise demand explanation, namely the king of Gododdin. This kingdom, based on Edinburgh, extended south for some considerable distance, even, it has been suggested, as far as Catraeth (Catterick).[42] If Lindisfarne and the mainland opposite were not actually in Gododdin territory it would be very close to it. Whether Morgant could have been its king is a question dependent in part on the date of the battle: we do not know the names of any of the sixth-century kings of Gododdin, but we do know that Mynyddog who ruled it in the opening years of the seventh century had a nation-wide reputation which could attract heroes from distant parts of Britain to his warband,[43] a reputation which he presumably did not acquire overnight. It is therefore reasonable to assume that he was ruling in the 590s, the date I consider most likely for the battle for reasons given below. As Mynyddog does not appear in any of the extant genealogies, it is impossible either to prove or disprove any connection between him and Morgant; the latter might have born to Mynyddog the same relationship as Gwallawg to Urien, in which case he could have been, as Morris suggests, the ruler of the area opposite Lindisfarne.

(iii) *The date*

Stenton, as I have noted above, regards the battle as taking place in the reign of Theodric and thus in the 570s.[44] R. S. Bromwich and P. Hunter Blair go for a date about 575,[45] on the same basis; Professor Jackson's reservations on this point have already been noticed. D. P. Kirby assumes a date in the 590s and reverses the reigns of Theodric and Hussa to accommodate this; Morris also plumps firmly for a date in the 580s–590s, but unfortunately he bases this on the accession date of Fiachna (*c.* 580) whom he misguidedly believes to have been Urien's ally.[46] The

[40] J. Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (London 1973), p. 235.

[41] The evidence for an Irish contingent at Degsastan (*c.* 603) is dubious, and rests largely on the mention in the Irish annals of a part played in a battle against the Saxons by Máelumai mac Báitáin, whose death is given in the *Annals of Ulster* as 610. K. Meyer (*Fianaigecht*, Roy. Ir. Acad. Todd Lecture Series XVI (1910) xiii–xiv) suggests that he was the subject of the lost tale, *Echtra Máelumai mac Báitáin*. He also quotes the title of another lost story, *Slugaid Fiachnai maic Báitáin co Dun nGúaire i Saxanáib* (The attack of Fiachna mac Báitáin on Dún Gúairi in the land of the Saxons), which is presumably one of Morris's "Irish Stories". He suggests that this Fiachna was the son of Báitán, king of Ulster (d. 581 or 587), who may have been in some sort of overlordship to Aedán mac Gabráin. According to the *Annals of Ulster* the destruction of Ráth Gúali (Din Guayroi or Bamburgh) took place in 632; thus without great juggling with dates and the assumption of confusion of two sons of Báitán there is in all this no justification for believing Fiachna to have been an ally of Urien.

[42] Jackson, *The Gododdin*, p. 75; this would certainly be the case if the area were coterminous with the region of the Votadini, as its name suggests (*ibid.*, p. 69).

[43] *Canu Aneirin, passim*. On the date of the raid, see Jackson, *The Gododdin*, pp. 11 ff.

[44] Stenton, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

[45] *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*; S.E.B.H., p. 155.

[46] Kirby, *op. cit.*, pp. 525 ff.; Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

evidence usually cited in favour of *c.* 570 is the misconception that the Anglian king is Theodric and his dates computed from the Moore Memoranda; its proponents can hardly disagree if, having shown that Urien's enemy was Hussa, I use the dates for the latter computed in the same way, i.e. *c.* 585–592. However, even if Kirby's arguments about that document and the succession in Bernicia are accepted (but ignoring his reversal of Theodric and Hussa, based on the usual misconception), the dates of Hussa are *c.* 586–593—virtually the same.[47] His theory, which is strongly argued, would incidentally make the date of Theodric *c.* 579–586, thus making the early or mid-570s an impossible date for the conflict.

The other method of arriving at an approximation of the date is by calculating from the genealogies the rough *floruit* of any of the participants, for which purpose it is usual to allow about thirty years to a generation; one can also find other figures of the same generation for whom dates are known. Urien is the fifth generation from Coel Hen; in that generation we find also Gwrgi, Peredur, Gwenddoleu and Llywarch Hen.[48] According to the *Annales Cambrae* Gwenddoleu was killed at the battle of Arfderydd (Arthuret) in 573 (*recte* 574); Gwrgi and Peredur are said to have died in 580 (*recte* 581). Unfortunately the *Annales* do not tell us their ages at their death; P. Hunter Blair assumes that this generation were all grown men about 560 and therefore born *c.* 530.[49] This would make Urien approximately 60 in the 590s, which seems an unlikely age at which to be leading an attack on the Anglo-Saxons. However, not everyone of the same generation need have been born even within a decade of each other, and equally Gwenddoleu could have died quite young—say in his twenties (it was, after all, in battle); this could make the mean date of birth *c.* 550 instead of *c.* 530. The *Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan* traces the ancestry of Rhodri Mawr back to Llywarch Hen; working back from Rhodri's death in 877 would suggest a date about 605 for Llywarch's death.[50] It is clear that not all the fifth generation from Coel were as early as P. Hunter Blair suggested, and it is quite possible that Urien was born *c.* 545, with a *floruit c.* 575–595; that would make him an active fifty-year-old at the battle, which is a reasonable possibility.

There is one further piece of genealogical information concerning Urien, namely that his son Owein is supposed to have been the father of Cynderyn Garthwys (St. Kentigern).[51] According to the *Annales Cambriae* the saint died in 612, and according to the earliest *Lives* (which are however far from contemporary) he did so at an advanced age. This would seem to militate against any late date for Urien: at a minimum there must be about thirty-five years between a man and his grandson, which means that if Urien were born *c.* 545 Kentigern cannot have been much over thirty at his death. However, since even if Urien were born *c.* 530 the saint would have died at about fifty, which is scarcely old in hagiographical terms, I am led to

[47] Kirby suggests that Bede is in any case one year out with his dating, and that Bernicia was founded in 548; which would advance all the dates in the Moore Memoranda system by one year (*E.H.R.* 78 pp. 516 ff).

[48] Harleian Genealogies; Jesus College MS; Bonedd Gwyr y Gogledd in Bartrum, *op. cit.*

[49] *Arch. Ael.* XXV, pp. 45–6.

[50] *Canu Llywarch Hen*, pp. xxviii–xxix. For the genealogy from *Hanes Gruffydd ap Cynan* see Bartrum, *op. cit.*, p. 36. Sir Ifor Williams points out that this date is if anything early, since Llywarch survived all his children.

[51] Bonedd y Saint 14; Achau'r Saint 13; Bonedd yr Arwyr 7 in Bartrum, *op. cit.*

suspect either that the "advanced age" is a hagiographical commonplace and untrue in this case, or that the ascription of paternity to Owein results only from a desire to provide Kentigern with a suitably noble lineage. (These two possibilities are not of course mutually exclusive.) I do not therefore think that the Kentigern tradition should be given any weight in the dating of the battle.

Of the other figures we have evidence of dates only for Rhydderch. There seems to have been a general assumption that he was king at the time of the battle of Arfderydd, but the earliest source which mentions his presence at that battle is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. The poem *Afallenau* tells us that after the battle Myrddin hid from Rhydderch, which suggests that he must have begun his reign at least fairly soon after the battle. In using this to date him, however, we must remember that he could have been quite young at this time; indeed, it is always possible that his father had been killed in the battle, which would account for his hatred of Myrddin, one of the supporters of Gwenddoleu. His death is not mentioned in the *Annales*, but we are told elsewhere that he died in the same year as St. Kentigern, to whom he was patron.[52] This may be no more than a pious tradition; but Adamnán, who has no axe to grind, tells us in his life of St. Columba that Rhydderch was alive at the time of that saint's death in 597. It is therefore quite feasible that he was young enough to take part in a battle in the early 590s; while if he was in any way concerned with the battle of Arfderydd it is unlikely that he would have taken part in any other major expedition for the next few years.[53] Such as we know about him, therefore, is quite compatible with the battle's date being in the early 590s.

(iv) *Who killed Urien and why?*

According to Nennius Urien was killed by Morgant; according to Triad 33 he was killed by Llofan Llaw Difro. These two traditions are by no means irreconcilable: kings are seldom inclined to do their own dirty work, and Llofan could well have been Morgant's agent. A sort of reconciliation of the two traditions is found in *Canu Llywarch Hen*, where both names appear:

Pwyllei Uorgant ef a'e wyr
Vyn dihol, llosgi vyn tymyr.
Llyc a grauei wrth glegyr!

(Morgant intended, he and his men, my exile, burning my lands. Cheese maggots scraping a rock!)

[52] Jocelyn of Furness, *Life of St. Kentigern*, ch. 45 (*ed. cit.*, p. 241).

[53] H. M. Chadwick (*Early Scotland* pp. 151–52) suggests that there was an alliance between Strathclyde and the Scottish kingdom of Dalriada, which Rhydderch terminated. If this is so, it is unlikely to have happened before Arfderydd, while the absence of Aedán from the Lindisfarne expedition suggests that it was terminated before that. I imagine therefore that Rhydderch was too preoccupied with his northern frontier in the 570s to go fighting on the other side of the country; this is, however, pure speculation.

and five *englynion* later:

> Angerd Uryen ys agro gennyf,
> Kyrchynat ym pob bro,
> Yn wisc Louan Law Difro.

(The strength of Urien is anguish to me, [Urien] the attacker of every country, after Llofan Llaw Difro.)[54]

Morgant is here one of a number of attackers, while from the last *englyn* it would seem that Llofan is the actual killer.

It is interesting that this poem implies that the killing happens in a pitched battle, with Dunawd attacking first Owein and then Pasgen, and Gwallawg attacking Elffin —these being sons of Urien according to the genealogies. It is usual to assume that Urien was murdered (or, as John Morris translates *iugulatus*, assassinated), which to us suggests a single act taking the victim by surprise. (This is perhaps because of the phrase *pro invidia*; jealousy in western tradition has overtones of something dark and secret.) Yet not only does *Canu Llywarch Hen* suggest a full battle, but there is that phrase in Nennius, "dum erat in expeditione". This could, of course, mean "while he was on the [main] campaign" i.e. the attack on Bernicia, and this is how it is usually read; but it could also be taken as "while he was on a raid". In my fertile imagination this conjures up either an ambush by Morgant and his followers while Urien was involved in some sort of incidental raid, or even perhaps a defection from the siege by Morgant and Gwallawg hotly pursued by an indignant Urien; either set of events could lead to a pitched battle. (This might also explain the lack of mention of Rhydderch in *Canu Llywarch Hen*—he would have been left at the main siege; but this scarcely requires explanation, since the traditions behind these poems are those of Rheged, not of Strathclyde. In the same way, listening to Americans today, it is easy to forget that Britain was involved in World War II.)

It is fair in any case to assume that Morgant had some hand in the killing, howsoever and by whomsoever the blow was actually struck; the next question is why. Nennius claims that he was jealous of Urien's great energy in making war. This could mean that he was jealous of Urien's prowess, or simply that he thought him a warmonger and himself just wanted to go home. However, we must be careful of accepting this explanation too easily in view of the strong pro-Rheged bias of Nennius's sources; Urien's *virtus maxima* may be somewhat flattering. John Morris suggests that Urien was disposing of Morgant's lands without his permission, but I have already shown that there is no evidence for this. Williams, in his edition of the Taliesin poems (p. lxviii) traces the problem to Urien's character:

> It is easy to see how a rift developed between Urien and his allies in the fight against the English in the second half of the sixth century: he did not know how to use the weapons at the disposal of the cunning and subtle diplomat: his weapons were the ones he had learnt to use in continual warfare with the enemy. It is not surprising that he was proud and that he excited the envy and eventually the enmity of his own allies.

[54] *Canu Llywarch Hen*, III 41, 46.

In both the first and the third of these explanations there is doubtless an element of truth, but they suggest that the killing of Urien was the result of special circumstances, in part at least dependent upon that ruler's character.

I am inclined to think that division and antagonism were part of the order of things in the late sixth century, and that the amazing occurrence at Lindisfarne was the temporary coalition of four British kings. Because we see the conflict as one between the Celts and the invading Anglo-Saxons, it is too easy to assume that it appeared the same at the time; there is no evidence that the British peoples thought of themselves as one nation, and strong evidence of much internal conflict. It has been suggested that there was a division amongst the Celts of the North on religious lines, Rhydderch and Urien being champions of a Christian grouping, and Gwenddoleu, Morgant and Gwallawg being in favour of the old, pagan religion.[55] Again, there may be some element of truth in this, although it is awkward for such an argument that the two of Taliesin's poems addressed to Gwallawg should start: "En enw gwledic nef", in the name of the lord of heaven, which in the context of Taliesin's Christianity as displayed for example in the *Marwnad Owein* can only refer to the Christian God.

Nevertheless, if we look at North Britain as it has come down to us in the literary tradition we find a picture of warring kingdoms and petty bickering. In the poem beginning "Lleuuyd echassaf mi nyw dirmygaf"[56] Taliesin appears to be appeasing the wrath of Urien for some fault connected with his relationship with other rulers, for he says:

> Nyt mawr ym dawr byth gweheleith a welaf.
> Nyt af attadunt ganthunt ny bydaf.
> Ny chyrchaf i gogled ar meiteyrned. (11.5–7)

(No great matter to me, what princes I see. I do not go to them, I do not stay with them. I do not search the North for great kings.)

Sir Ifor Williams has suggested, quite reasonably, that this poem should be read in conjunction with the two to Gwallawg, for which it is an apology to Urien.[57] It is at any rate suggestive of dissension among the northern Princes.

Here again the position of the king of Gododdin becomes relevant. I demonstrated earlier that he was a figure whom one would expect to be present; equally I have shown that, accepting the late date of the battle, it is unlikely to be Morgant. It might be that trouble on his northern frontier kept him away; Irish sources record that Aedán mac Gabráin of Dalriada won a battle of Mano *c.* 583,[58] and this may well be Manaw in Gododdin.[59] Certainly Aedán must have made some inroads into Gododdin territory in order to be able to meet the English at the battle of Degsastan

[55] H. Barnes, "On the battle of Ardderyd", *Trans. Cumb. & West. Ant. & Arch. Soc.*, New Series 8 (1908), p. 244. He bases his statement on the rather dubious interpretation he makes of Gwenddoleu's attributes as listed in the Triads.

[56] *Ed. cit.* no. IX; Book of Taliesin, no. 65.

[57] Williams, *Poems of Taliesin*, p. lix.

[58] A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History* (Edinburgh 1922), I p. 89.

[59] So Chadwick, *Early Scotland*, p. 124. Anderson takes it to be the Isle of Man, but Aedán's interests surely lie to the south-east of his kingdom.

in 603.[60] Nevertheless, at about the same time the king of Gododdin was able to mount the expedition which penetrated as far south as Catraeth,[61] and although he may have been aided by his neighbours' temporary preoccupation with each other he must have felt reasonably confident of his defences. It is surprising then that at a time when Adamnán's *Life of St. Columba* suggests that Aedán was occupied with the pictish tribe of the Miathi (the Maeatae?)[62] Gododdin could send no aid to those driving out the English from what had once been Gododdin land.

This would not be strange if there was any reason for hostility between Gododdin and any of the coalition kingdoms, and in the literature we can find traces of such hostility. If there were any truth in the tradition of St. Kentigern's being the son of Owein by his rape of the daughter of the king of Edinburgh (i.e. of Gododdin),[63] then there would be a valid reason for it. I have already cast doubts on this tradition, but it is worthwhile to bear in mind that it may have arisen because of the existence of a similar tale about Owein and the king's daughter. There is also a poem by Taliesin which openly mentions hostility between the two kingdoms. Each man of Urien's warband set out, he says, "Ae varch ydanaw yg godeu gweith mynaw"—his steed beneath him, intending war on Manaw.[64] Judging from the triumphant joy with which the poet hails their return from line 17 onward, the raid was a success; but it can hardly have endeared the names of Rheged and Urien to the king of Gododdin. It is even possible that if Morgant *were* king of the area near Lindisfarne, and a client of the king of Gododdin, he was prompted by the latter into causing Urien's death.

Earlier in the century we find evidence of internecine warfare among the Celts in the battle of Arfderydd. There is no clear evidence of why this was fought, and the whole tale has become so woven into the Myrddin legend that very little is clear at all. The only thing which does stand out is that nowhere is there any mention of the Anglo-Saxons having any part in it. According to the "B" text of the *Annales Cambriae*, the two sides were led by Gwenddoleu map Keidiaw and "the sons of Elifer"; this text is a little suspect from its use of the late form "Merlinus", but if it does preserve a genuine tradition, then the battle may well have been a family

[60] The exact place of this battle is not known. P. Hunter Blair discusses some of the suggestions which have been made (*S.E.B.H.*, p. 157 n. 2) and himself suggests that it was probably an attempt to win back the former British territories (*ibid.*, p. 158). Tigernach and the *Annals of Ulster* date the battle as 599 (*recte* 600), but they seem to pre-date other events by two to three years, and there is thus no reason to question Bede's dating.

[61] Jackson, *Gododdin*, pp. 8 ff. The fact that the raid was jointly on Bernicia and Deira suggests that the two were united. If we accept my earlier argument that Æthelric's appearance in the Deiran king list is a confusion caused by the genealogies, or if we accept the regnal order suggested by Kirby, *E.H.R.* 78 pp. 526–27, the only possible time is the early years of Æthelfrith's reign.

[62] *Ed. cit.*, I ch. 8. No date is given, but it must be before the saint's death in 597, and was presumably after the victory of 583.

[63] Her father is called Leudonus, but Jackson (*S.E.B.C.* p. 282) points out that this looks like an eponym from Lothian, and not a genuine name.

[64] *Poems of Taliesin*, no. V, 1.6. It is possible that Manaw refers to the Isle of Man, its usual meaning, although the mention of horses surely implies a land attack. This would therefore mean Manaw in Gododdin (which is Sir Ifor Williams's conclusion also), on the relationship of which to Gododdin proper see Jackson, *The Gododdin*, pp. 70 ff.

affair—Gwrgi and Peredur, cousins of Gwenddoleu, are given in the genealogies as sons of Eliffer.

All this evidence, little if any of which can be called truly "historical", suggests a picture of a North Britain divided among itself, whether for family feuds, or religious reasons, or greed, or whatever else. That four kings should have co-operated for a while, even in their own best interests, is surprising; that one at least of them saw the campaign as an opportunity to kill a rival or an overlord is not. Even allowing for bias on the part of Nennius's sources, Urien must have been a powerful king, and there would be those who did not wish to see his power increased; possibly Rhydderch should be counted among these, which is why he did nothing to aid Urien. At the time, Bernicia must have seemed a poor threat, with Hussa cooped up on his damp island, and Æthelfrith still to show his prowess; getting rid of Urien could well have seemed the more important task to those whose nationalism was confined to their own borders rather than to their race or to Britain as a whole. In this battle, therefore, and especially in such facts as can be gleaned from the non-historical evidence, we have a good picture of the way Britain was lost by the Cymru, rather than being won by the English.