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Din Guoaroy, the Old Welsh Name of Bamburgh

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SUMMARY

A combination of linguistic and archaeological evidence suggest that the Old Welsh name of Bamburgh can be translated as 'theatre fort', and that its coinage postdates English settlement.

D*in Guoaroy*, the name of Bamburgh in Old Welsh, has been one of the mysteries of Northumberland. Its meaning and even form have been unknown. Yet a fresh look at the evidence seems to vindicate a derivation proposed by Sir Ifor Williams in the 1930s.

Discussion has been thus. The toponym occurs twice in the ninth-century compilation *Historia Brittonum*. This says of early Northumbrian kings that 'Ida, the son of Eoppa, held the districts in the north part of Britain, that is, north of the sea of Humber, and reigned for twelve years, and he joined *Din Guayrdi* to Bernicia.' It goes on to state that 'Æthelfrith *Flesaur* ['twister'] reigned twelve years in Bernicia and another twelve in Deira; he reigned 24 between the two kingdoms. And he gave *Din Guoaroy* to his wife, who was called Bebba, and from the name of his wife it took its name, *Bebbanburh*.'¹

William Watson noted a link between the above and the twelfth-century Book of Leinster, which mentions the story *Sluagad Fiachna maic Báitáin co Dún nGuairé i Saxanaib*, 'The hosting of Fiachna son of Báitán to Dún Guaire in the land of the Saxons'. Though the tale is lost, we know Fiachna was a famous warrior killed in the year 626, and that his father was king of Ulster. Watson also cited an entry from the *Annals of Ulster* on 'the storming of Ráth Guali by Fiachna son of Báetán' in 623. He believed this referred to a successful Irish raid on the Northumbrian coast.² As regards etymology, Sir Ifor Williams thought the best explanation for *Din Guoaroy* was from Welsh *din* 'fortress, stronghold' and *gwarwy* 'play'. He compared Old Welsh *guarai* glossing *scena*, *guaroiou* (a plural) glossing *theatra*, and *guaroiomaou* glossing *theatris*, where the last has the plural (*maou*) of the suffix *-ma* 'plain, field'. He considered Bamburgh may have had an amphitheatre or playing field.³

Peter Hunter Blair cited Watson's discussion and described *Din Guoaroy* as a form of 'considerable interest', but pointed out confusions in what *Historia Brittonum* says. He observed that not all authorities agree Bebba was Æthelfrith's wife, while 'he joined *Din Guayrdi* to Bernicia' is obscure, so that some scribes of *Historia Brittonum* saw it as corrupt and interpreted it as meaning that Ida joined Bernicia to Deira. Yet Hunter Blair thought it useful to know that, as early as the ninth century, Welsh tradition took Bamburgh as a fortress of Bernicia's early kings.⁴

In a classic paper, Kenneth Jackson reviewed readings of manuscripts of *Historia Brittonum*. For the first of the two references the best manuscripts give *Din Guayrdi* and inferior ones *Din Gueirm* (or *Gueirin* or *Gueirin*). Jackson suggested *Din Guayrdi* was a corruption of *Din*

Guoaroy, but admitted the reverse was possible. He described the Irish records cited by Watson, where *Dún Guaire* and *Ráth Guaili* would support the reading *Din Guoaroy*, as less conclusive than might be thought, because *Ráth Guaili* was surely in Munster, not England. Yet Jackson still thought *Din Guoaroy* preferable to *Din Guayrði*. It has an equivalent with *-uuaroe* and *-uuaroi* (of unknown meaning) in Old Breton personal names. His view of Ifor Williams's connection with Welsh *gwarwy* 'play', indicating an amphitheatre at the spot, was negative and cold. He called it 'very conjectural'. Jackson mentioned the reading *Gueirin* as also possible, though its sense is not known. He concluded, 'The whole problem is full of obscurities.'⁵

The Ordnance Survey's map of Dark Age Britain gives the reading not as *Din Guoaroy* but *Dinguayroi*, presumably through amendment of *Dinguayrði*.⁶ Although the subject is investigated in an important paper by David Dumville, he leaves the Welsh without explanation.⁷ The English Place-Name Society contents itself by giving the readings *Dinguayrði* and *Dinguoaroy*, where the first element means 'fort' but the remainder is an 'unexplained element or name'.⁸ John Koch maps Bamburgh with the Welsh form *Din Guairoi* and Irish form *Dún Guaire*; refers to excavations of forts in North Britain; and classifies Bamburgh as a cliff-top stronghold, like Dunollie, near Oban in Argyll.⁹

Despite recent discussion, there has been no progress as regards actual meaning here. Yet there seems a simple answer to the problem. Ifor Williams associated *Dinguoaroy* with Welsh *gwarwy*. Although Jackson treated the suggestion dustily, it has clear advantages. It makes sense, when no other suggestion does; it fits readings in the best manuscripts of *Historia Brittonum*; it has parallels in other place-names; and, most surprisingly, it accords with discoveries in Northumbrian archaeology. Let us look at the evidence.

At first a meaning might appear implied by toponyms referring to sport and pastimes. In England these include Follifoot 'place where horse-fights occur', Hesketh 'racecourse', Mondrum 'joyous life among men', Plaistow 'sports place', and Plawsworth 'sports enclosure'.¹⁰ They resemble *Cae'ryrfa* 'field of the race-course' in Glamorgan, which perhaps explains *Treverva* in Cornwall as 'racecourse homestead'.¹¹ In Scotland is *Dalwhinnie* 'valley of champions'.¹² So one might initially think that the Britons knew Bamburgh as a place of 'playing', as with a spot by the river Thaw in Glamorgan, where *Historia Brittonum* tells of how the *Wunderkind* Ambrosius was found with boys playing ball.

Nevertheless, there seems a still better alternative, of far greater interest to archaeologists and historians. Working from Brian Hope-Taylor's reports on Yeavinger, James Campbell refers to the remarkable buildings of the Anglo-Saxon court there, none more so than a 'grandstand'. He says it was 'rather like a segment of a Roman amphitheatre, which stood facing a platform. When first built, possibly under Æthelfrith, it had accommodated about 150 people; later, perhaps under Edwin, it was enlarged to hold about 320.' It can have been used only for meetings, where one man on a platform, surely the king, faced many. Campbell compares this with Bede's narrative of Edwin's consultation at York with kinsmen, nobles, and counsellors. Stressing the Yeavinger structure's political implications, Campbell refers to the 'grandstand' as the 'oldest item in the constitutional archaeology of England.' He adds that, although Yeavinger was a major centre for Bernicia, it was far less important than Bamburgh, twenty miles away.¹³

That brings us back to Ifor Williams's comment on a stadium at Bamburgh and the Old Welsh glosses *guarai* 'playhouse', *guaroiou* 'theatres', and *guaroi-maou* 'theatre places'. If there were a similar structure at Bamburgh, a 'grandstand' like that at Yeavinger, *guayroi* would

describe it perfectly. It is certainly not difficult to see *Dinguoaroy* as Old Welsh *din guarai* 'theatre fort, auditorium fort', with *Dinguayrdi* as a corruption of that, the penultimate letter being misread as *d*, as Jackson suggested. The precision of the Welsh may be emphasized. A Roman theatre was in shape either a semicircle or half of an oval; but an amphitheatre was a full circle or oval, as its name suggests. The Old Welsh glosses refer to the first. They hence do not refer to a circular or oval structure, like the Colosseum in Rome or the amphitheatre at Caerleon. They refer to a theatre, shaped like the letter D, where the audience, arranged through 180 degrees, faced a stage running in a straight line. The coincidence in meaning between the sense of the Old Welsh and the shape of the Yeavinger 'grandstand' is remarkable. It must also prove that Bamburgh's Welsh name was of learned and not popular origin.

If, then, *Dinguoaroy* means 'theatre fort', as seems likely, it has two major implications. First, if there were a wooden auditorium at Bamburgh like the one at Yeavinger, *Dinguoaroy* could not be Bamburgh's pre-English name, used of a British stronghold that Leslie Alcock thought preceded the Anglo-Saxon one.¹⁴ He asked, if Ida 'was responsible for building Bamburgh, why it had a British name, which is what *Dinguoaroy* clearly is. There seems to be a strong possibility that Ida took over a pre-existing British promontory fort, and used it first as a beach-head and subsequently as the citadel of his kingdom.'¹⁵

Yet a little thought on *Dinguoaroy* turns Alcock's reasoning upside-down. This leads to our second implication. Many Old Welsh toponyms recorded in *Historia Brittonum* and elsewhere have an artificial and pedantic air, as if they were literal translations by Welsh scholars of English originals, or else inventions. The best-known examples are *Historia Brittonum*'s *Cantscaul* 'young warrior's enclosure', which (slightly inaccurately) translates *Hagustaldesham* or Hexham 'young warrior's homestead', and Asser's *Tigguocobauc* 'cavy house' for Nottingham (a city famous for caves).¹⁶ Neither of these was a living form in Welsh speech. Other problematic toponyms in Welsh-Latin are surely of the same kind, like Asser's *Ruim* for Thanet, Kent.¹⁷ *Din Guoaroy* may resemble these. Just as Asser knew that Nottingham had caves and hence used a quaint learned term for it, so other scholars knew Bamburgh had a stage and concocted for it the artificial term *Din Guoaroy* 'theatre fort'. Hence, it seems, this pure book-form, which has caused such difficulties for editors and historians.

Such a view removes many difficulties. Jackson referred to *Din Guoaroy* as one of 'the old British names of places in Northumbria, before they were christened with new ones by the English; and these must have come from an early source, and a Northern one, since they would scarcely have been current in Wales' in the ninth century, when *Historia Brittonum* was drawn up.¹⁸ But, whatever the truth elsewhere, this makes two assumptions for *Din Guoaroy*: that it is pre-English, and that it could not have been invented in Wales. We need believe neither. We are on firmer ground with Professor Dumville, who emphasizes how little material in this part of *Historia Brittonum* is genuinely historical, and how much derives from the preconceptions of ninth-century compilers.¹⁹

If one treats *Din Guoaroy* as a book-expression, like the Old Welsh names of Hexham and Nottingham, several things become clear. We need not believe that there was a British fort immediately before the Northumbrian one. There *may* have been such a fort (there is evidence for Iron Age occupation of the site), but *Din Guoaroy* is no authority for it. The form also undermines the authority of the two passages in *Historia Brittonum*. No wonder their account of Northumbrian history seems muddled. It is hence far from being a proof of an early North British source (as Jackson imagined) that goes back to a time 'when British was still spoken in the area'.²⁰ It is evidence not for the sixth century, but for the ninth. Yet there are more positive

aspects. If there were a wooden theatre at Yeaveering, it is hard to believe that there was no such structure at Bamburgh, and that it was one of the wonders of Britain. Celtic writers had a taste for marvels. Some of them figure in *Historia Brittonum*, like the hot springs of Bath.²¹ It seems that, much as Asser knew Nottingham for its caves, so Bamburgh was known to the Britons for its theatre, the remains of which may perhaps be detected at Bamburgh. If so, the Bamburgh auditorium would be an item for Campbell's 'constitutional archaeology'. (The editor of this journal suggests that the name may be due to the natural theatre at Bamburgh, now the location of a cricket ground. Though this is possible, it would make little sense unless the spot was used for assemblies.)

One might say a little more on the history of the structure at Bamburgh. It is accepted that Yeaveering was destroyed by Penda in 633 and again in 651. By the 680s the site was abandoned, and Bede says the court moved to nearby Milfield.²² Buildings at Bamburgh, where we have records of early sieges (including one of 651, witnessed by St Aidan from the Farne Islands offshore), will also have been destroyed by war. Yet Bamburgh remained one of the centres of Northumbrian government, and they would thus have been rebuilt. That *Din Guoaroy* was known as such in the ninth century suggests the wooden auditorium survived at least into the eighth century, to be known in far-away Wales. It may have existed until the Viking age.

If the above arguments are sound, they allow four conclusions. First, we can accept the reading *Dinguoaroy* of the Harleian reception and understand it, following Ifor Williams, as 'theatre fort' (not 'amphitheatre fort'). Other readings may be ruled out as meaningless and corrupt. Second, we may associate the form with a wooden auditorium (perhaps awaiting archaeological discovery) that was used for political purposes. If it is found, it will cast new light on discussions of Bamburgh and Yeaveering, as also on political gatherings in the middle ages.²³ Third, we may regard it not as evidence for pre-English Bamburgh or any British fort there, but for the fame of this Northumbrian capital in Wales during the ninth century (a fame also suggested by the tale in the Book of Leinster saga-list).²⁴ It weakens *Historia Brittonum* as an authority for the sixth century, but gives a better understanding of Welsh scholars in the ninth. Fourth, and more generally, it can be seen that a solution here was given by Sir Ifor Williams over seventy years ago; that it was effectively ignored by all subsequent writers; but that advances in archaeological research apparently show it was right.²⁵

NOTES

¹ *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd ed., London (1979), 262.

² W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, Edinburgh (1926), 132.

³ *Canu Aneirin*, ed. Ifor Williams, Caerdydd (1938), xlv n. 2.

⁴ Peter Hunter Blair, 'The Bernicians and their Northern Frontier', in *Studies in Early British History*, ed. Nora Chadwick, Cambridge (1954), 137–72, at 148–9.

⁵ K. H. Jackson, 'On the Northern British Section in Nennius', in *Celt and Saxon*, ed. Nora Chadwick, Cambridge (1963), 20–62, at 27–8.

⁶ *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages*, 2nd ed., Southampton (1966).

⁷ D. N. Dumville, "'Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*', *Studia Celtica*, 10–11 (1975–6), 78–95.

⁸ *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, ed. Victor Watts, Cambridge (2004), 33.

⁹ J. T. Koch, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies*, Oxford (2007), map 21.2.

¹⁰ Watts, 235, 299, 474–5.

¹¹ Watts, 628; A. C. Breeze, 'Cornish Toponyms: Crim Rocks, Darite, Perranuthnoe, Port Isaac, and Treverva', *Celtica* 25 (2007), 1–8.



- ¹² Watson, 145.
- ¹³ Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeaving: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*, London (1977); James Campbell, 'The First Christian Kings', in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. James Campbell, Oxford (1982), 45–69, at 57.
- ¹⁴ Leslie Alcock, *Bede, Eddius, and the Forts of the North Britons*, Jarrow (1988), 5–6, 12–15.
- ¹⁵ Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, London (1971), 346.
- ¹⁶ Jackson, 34; Whitelock, 263; Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, Harmondsworth (1983), 77, 241.
- ¹⁷ A. C. Breeze, 'An Emendation to *Ruoihm* "Thanet" in *Historia Brittonum*', *Studia Celtica*, 41 (2007), 234–7.
- ¹⁸ Jackson, 45.
- ¹⁹ D. N. Dumville, 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Arthurian Literature*, 6 (1986), 1–26.
- ²⁰ Jackson, 45.
- ²¹ A. C. Breeze, 'Two Arthurian Sites in *Historia Brittonum*', *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society*, 76 (2006), 88–97.
- ²² Alcock, *Bede*, 8.
- ²³ Cf. *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint*, eds. Clare Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge, Stamford (1995), 134–9; *Assembly Places and Practices in Medieval Europe*, eds. A. Pantos and S. Semple, Dublin (2004); *Yeaving: People, Power, and Place*, eds. Paul Frodsham and Colm O'Brien, Stroud (2005), 174–84. I thank Professor R. N. Bailey for these references.
- ²⁴ A. C. Breeze, 'Scéla Cano Meic Gartnáin, Fiachna, son of Báitán, and Bamburgh', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 24 (2008), 87–95.
- ²⁵ On the present subject see now James E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, Edinburgh (2009), 149–52, 160.



