

The Year of the Reception of the Saxones.

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No small interval after the third consulship of Aëtius in A.D. 446, when southern Britain was now occupied by independent communities of 'Welsh' and 'English', an event occurred in the island, the significance of which underwent in after times extraordinary misconception. It appears that in that western portion of southern Britain where the Britons were generally collected and which in Latin was known as *Britannia*, a certain 'Welsh' king invited certain 'English' to assist him against his enemies and received them with hospitality. The name of the king is given later as Vortigern, his enemies are said to have been Picts and Scots, and the English whom he invited and received are called *Saxones*. Whether the incident was really important or otherwise, it was afterwards made to mean *the first coming of the English to Britain*, and the year was remembered.

Let it be said at once that there was no year when the English landed for the first time in the island of Britain at the invitation of the Welsh. The story is as mythical as the Gomic origin of the Cymry. The Saxons, as is well known, had begun to infest the south-eastern coast of Roman Britain as early as the third century. To check or regulate their movements the Romans had established a system of coast defence from the Wash to the Isle of Wight, which was known as *Litus Saxonicum*, the Saxon Shore.

This system, which consisted of some nine forts, was in full activity at the beginning of the fourth century, being under the control of a *comes* or Count of the Saxon Shore. To what extent the Saxons settled in Roman Britain before and whilst this system prevailed, is a question which as yet has hardly been raised, the general opinion being that the first Saxon settlement in Britain must have occurred after the departure of the tyrant, Constantine, in A.D. 407. In 409 the Britanniæ were devastated by an incursion of Saxons, which does not necessarily mean Saxons from over the sea. In 429 Saxons were fighting in conjunction with Picts in some mountainous part of south Britain. In 439 the Britanniæ, lost by the Romans, yielded to the sovereignty of the Saxons. Again in 441 the Britanniæ, which up to this time had been torn by various slaughters and disasters, are brought under the dominion of the Saxons. And before the end of the fifth century the Saxons were so powerful in Britain that Aelle of Sussex was Bretwalda, or chief ruler of England, south of the Humber. About the beginning of the sixth century five of the chief kings of Britannia attacked by St. Gildas are Constantine of Devon, Aurelius Caninus of Cornwall, Vortiporius of Dyved (S.W. Wales), Cynlas of Dinerth, near Llandudno, and Maelgwn Gwynedd of Anglesey, which indicates that Britannia meant to him that portion of Britain, which now goes under the names of Wales and the West Country (the Devonian peninsula). In 554 Britain contains three numerous nations, Britons, Angles, and Frisians, which crowd the island to such an extent that they migrate yearly in great numbers to the continent. All this and more proves that the English were established in Britain not only before some interval after the third consulship of Aëtius in A.D. 446, but even long before that consulship.

Nevertheless, some no small interval after A.D. 446 a 'Welsh' king did invite and did receive *Saxones* into *Britannia*, and this incident, as I have said, was strangely made to mean that on that occasion the English came and settled in Britain for the first time. It was regarded as the first advent of the Saxons, and in after times diligent attempts were made both in Welsh and English circles to fix the precise year.

Now that year was known to the author of the *Excidium Britanniae*, It was no small interval after the third consulship of Aëtius in 446. He does not state what the year was, but we can determine it in this wise. He tells us that when the *Saxones* came, there was a prophecy current among them that they should occupy *Britannia* for 300 years, and that for the first half of this period, that is, for 150 years, they should not cease fighting with the Britons. As fighting did not cease until the Battle of the Badonic Hill, which occurred in the first year of peace, that battle was fought when a round 150 years had been completed from the Saxon advent. We learn from the *Annales Cambriae* that the Battle of the Badonic Hill took place in A.D. 665. Consequently the 150 years of strife extended from 514 to 664, and the year when the *Saxones* were received into *Britannia* was A.D. 514.

II.

The *Excidium Britanniae* was written in A.D. 708. We know this because its author tells us he was writing in the forty-fourth year of the great peace which began in A.D. 665 with the victory at the Badonic Hill. The little book received great attention both in Welsh and English circles. By A.D. 725 it had come into the hands of Bede, who quotes from it in that year in his *De temporum ratione*. In A.D. 730 Bede was using it as his chief authority for

British affairs in the fifth and sixth centuries, quoting and paraphrasing the greater portion of it in his celebrated *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Unfortunately, however, the *Excidium Britanniae* was shockingly misunderstood. It came to be regarded as a work of the Welsh ecclesiastic, St. Gildas, who flourished in the early sixth century! The forty-fourth year from the Battle of the Badonic Hill was made to mean that the Battle was fought about forty-four years after the Saxon advent! And the author was taken to be writing his treatise a generation later, that is, about the middle of the sixth century! Bede, however, faithfully adhered to its evidence that the *Saxones* were received into *Britannia* after the third consulship of Aëtius in A.D. 446.

Now about the time when the *Excidium Britanniae* was written, which, being also the age of Aldhelm and Bede, was a period of increased literary activity, there was a brief extant in Britain, which in its correct British form would have read as follows: *Quando Gratianus consul fuit quarto et Aequitius secundo, tunc his consulibus, Saxones a Guorthigerno in Britanniam suscepti sunt anno CCCXLVIII° a passione Christi*, When Gratian was consul for the fourth time and Aequitius for the second time, these being then consuls, the *Saxones* were received into *Britannia* by Vortigern in the 348th year from the Passion of Christ. The year indicated is our A.D. 375. The problem arose at once as to how to reconcile this brief which places the reception of the *Saxones* in A.D. 375 with the evidence of the *Excidium Britanniae* which places it some interval after the third consulship of Aëtius in A.D. 446.

The Erroneous Solution of 449.

Somebody observed that A.D. 375 was the first year of the joint-reigns of Gratian and Valentinian II, and that

A.D. 450 was the first year of the joint-reigns of Martian and Valentinian III. He concluded that there had been confusion between the names of the emperors, and in accordance with the evidence of the *Excidium Britanniae* which places the Saxon advent after A.D. 446, he fixed it in A.D. 450. Our theorist, however, in denoting that year did not use the formula "A.D. 450" but another one, which ignores the current year and reckons only *the years completed*. He did not say that Vortigern received the Saxons in A.D. 450, but (meaning the same thing) that Vortigern received them *when 449 years of our Lord were completed and done with*. It was from this theorist and computist that Bede drew his 449 and his "about 449" as the year of the Saxon advent.

The Erroneous Solution of 428.

As 449 or "about 449" is forty years from the sack of Rome by the Goths when Roman rule in Britain was held by some to cease, the computists who accepted 449 would say that Vortigern received the Saxons forty years after the end of Roman domination in Britain. The *Excidium Britanniae*, however, would make it appear that Roman rule in Britain ceased with the death of Maximus in 388. It was Maximus who drained the island of all its military strength and exposed it for the first time to the attacks of barbarians from over the water, first, the Picts and Scots, and then the Saxons. Maximus took away with him to the continent all the soldiers and military supplies of Britain, *and they never returned*. With his death, therefore, in A.D. 388, Roman rule ended, notwithstanding the fact that Roman armies are made to come twice afterwards to the island to assist the Britons. If, then, there was an interval of forty years between the end of Roman rule in Britain and the advent of the Saxons, those who

regarded the former to have occurred in A.D. 388 would fix the latter in A.D. 428. It was from such inconsequence that the *Historia Brittonum* deduced A.D. 428, when Felix and Taurus were consuls, as the year of the Saxon advent.

III.

Let us now return to the puzzling brief which stated that the Saxons were received into Britain when Gratian was consul for the fourth time and Aequitius for the second time, being the 348th year from the Passion of Christ.

Before this brief was put together the computists in Britain had come across the following remarkable passage in a late edition of the *Liber Pontificalis*:—

Eleuther natione Graecus ex patre Abundio de oppido Nicopoli sedit ann. xv. m. iiii. d. ii. Fuit temporibus Antonini et Commodi usque ad Paterno et Bradua. Hic accepit epistula a Lucio Britannio rege ut Christianus efficeretur per ejus mandatum.

Eleuther, a Greek by nation, his father being Abundius of the city of Nicopolis, occupied the see 15 years, 3 months, and 2 days. It was in the times of Antoninus and Commodus till Paternus and Bradua [consuls]. This man received a letter from Lucius, king of Britain, that he might be made a Christian by his command.

I am not here concerned with the interesting matter of the origin of this passage or its grammar or the strangeness of the form *Britannio*; only that it was read in Britain to mean that sometime from A.D. 161 when Antoninus and Commodus began to reign, a king of Britain, named Lucius, sent a letter to Pope Eleuther asking to be made a Christian. Aldhelm (died 709) and the *Excidium Britanniae* (written in 708) shew no knowledge of it, nor does Bede when he was writing his *De temporibus* in 702-3. When, however, in 725 he was writing his *De temporum ratione*, he had already come across the passage,

for under the reign of Marcus Aurelius he has *Lucius Britanniae rex, missa ad Eleutherium Romae Episcopum epistola, ut Christianus efficiatur, impetrat*, Lucius, king of Britain, seeks to be made a Christian, a letter having been sent to Eleutherius, Bishop of Rome (*Opera Bedae*, vi, 305-6). Bede does not fix the year in this work, but by 730 when he wrote his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, he places it within the joint reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Aurelius Commodus, that is, from 161 to 169 (i, 4), and limits the incident to the year 167 (v, 24), thus: "In the year of our Lord 167 Eleuther, being made bishop at Rome, governed the Church most gloriously fifteen years, to whom Lucius, king of Britain, sent a letter, asking to be made a Christian, and succeeded in obtaining his request".

The Britons, also, had come across the passage in the *Liber Pontificalis*, which they interpreted in this fashion :

Post CLXVII annos post adventum Christi Lucius Britannicus rex cum omnibus regulis totius Brittanicae gentis baptismum suscepit missa legatione ab imperatore Romanorum et a papa Romano Eucharisto (or Euaristo or Eleutherio).

After 167 years from the Advent of Christ, Lucius, British king, with all the rulers of the whole British race, received baptism, an embassy having been sent by the emperor of the Romans and by the Roman Pope, E.

Thus it is evident that for some reason both in English and Welsh circles the year 167 had been determined as that when the Britons first received Christianity. Now, as the frequent inanner of the Britons was to compute from events in their own history, it would be tempting to some British computist to date from so important an event as this supposed first general Christianization of Britain, once it was believed that it had been chronologically determined. We must assume, therefore, that in this period of revival of learning when Aldhelm, and the author of the *Excidium Britanniae*, and Bede were living, some

British computist reckoned the Reception of the *Saxones* into *Britannia* in A.D. 514 as having occurred in the 348th year from the Conversion of *Lucius*, that is, 167 plus 347 = 514. Somebody misread the 348th year from *Lucius* as the 348th year from the Passion of Christ and, looking up the consular names for that year, Gratianus IV and Aequitius II, straightway wrote out the brief fixing the Saxon advent in A.D. 375, which has proved the puzzle of ages.

IV.

Although the author of the *Excidium Britanniae* knew exactly what the year was in which the *Saxones* were invited and received into *Britannia*, he did not state it explicitly. He makes it clear, however, that it was no small interval after the third consulship of Aëtius in A.D. 446, and that it began the 150 years of strife between Welsh and English which immediately preceded the year of the Badonic Hill. It is only because we have the definite entry in the *Annales Cambriae* that the Badonic Hill was fought in A.D. 665 that we are able to say that the *Saxones* were received in A.D. 514.

Our author, however, must have had a way of fixing the year in his own mind. It is not likely that he counted from the Conversion of *Lucius*, as he gives no indication that he was aware of that legend. He may have reckoned from the Passion of Christ. But it is more than probable that just as he knew the interval between the actual time in which he was writing and the victory at the Badonic Hill, and just as he knew the interval between the victory and the reception of the *Saxones*, so he would have been quite cognisant of the interval between the reception of the *Saxones* and the third consulship of Aëtius. He would have said that the *Saxones* came into *Britannia* in the sixty-ninth year from Aëtius, thrice consul (thus, 514

minus 68 = 446). Now it is this simple calculation which seems to be the underlying cause of the initial year of the *Annales Cambriae*.

If my readers will open the famous Volume ix. of *Y Cymmrodor* at p. 152, they will there see the beginning of the precious Latin Welsh Chronicle, drawn up in the tenth century, which now goes under the unhappy, modern, gimcrack name of *Annales Cambriae*. The Chronicle is preceded by a number of chronological notes from the Beginning of the World up to Decius and Valerianus. Then the annals begin with Annus i, ii, iii, etc., the first entry occurring opposite Annus ix. Mr. Phillimore, who edits the Chronicle, follows earlier writers, such as the editors of *Monumenta Hist. Britannica*, ab Ithel, and Skene, in equating Annus i with A.D. 444. In this he and his predecessors are wrong, even on their own showing, for they equate other *anni* on the assumption that Annus i is A.D. 445, which last is right. Thus Mr. Phillimore equates Annus ix with 453; he should, therefore, have equated Annus i not with A.D. 444, but with A.D. 445. It cannot be stated too often that Annus i of the *Annales Cambriae* is A.D. 445.

But why should the Chronicler have commenced his annals with this year, 445, against which there is no entry of any kind? Many attempts have been made to explain it, to which I now venture to add the one following.

I believe that the opening of the annals with Annus i [=A.D. 445] is intimately connected with the chronological note which immediately precedes it, which note reads thus:—[A]b anno quo Saxones uenerunt in Brittanniam et a Guorthigirno suscepti sunt usque ad Decium et Ualerianum anni sunt sexaginta nouem, From the year in which the Saxones came into Britannia and were received by Vorti-

gern until Decius and Valerian are 69 years. In short, my view is that this note is the true beginning of the Chronicle. It will be observed that in the original manuscript, as reproduced by Mr. Phillimore, this chronological note is not connected with those which go before but begins a fresh line, space being provided for a coloured capital [A] which the illuminator failed to insert. The preceding notes revolve around the erroneous idea that the *Saxones* were received in A.D. 428. This note, however, reverts to the brief, with which I have dealt above, that the *Saxones* were received in the 348th year from Christ's Passion, which is our A.D. 375, for if 69 be added to 375 we obtain A.D. 444. The Chronicler, having now commenced by saying that from the reception of the *Saxones* to Decius and Valerian are sixty-nine years, and having thus brought us to A.D. 444, straightway begins his Chronicle with Annus I, which equates with the year following, to wit, A.D. 445.

But what shall we say of Decius and Valerian, the familiar names of two persecuting emperors of the third century! The answer is that Valerian has been added to Decius from the mere familiar conjunction of the names, as the ridiculous *mus* was added to the Decius of Pedigree xvi of the genealogies in the same codex (*Y Cymmrodor*, ix, 176); and that *decius* is an easy error for *aetius*, an error which will be readily appreciated by every reader of medieval manuscripts, the interchange of *d* and *a*, and of *c* and *t*, being common occurrences in these old writings. I believe that the original computation gave the interval between Aëtius in his third consulship in A.D. 446, to whom the Britons sent the famous letter cited in the *Excidium Britanniae*, and the Reception of the *Saxones* in A.D. 514, somewhat, let us say, as follows, *In anno lxxviii^o ab aetio saxones uenerunt in britanniam*, In the sixty-ninth year from Aëtius came the *Saxones* into *Britannia*, etc.

This was erroneously paraphrased to signify that there was an interval of sixty-nine years from the Saxon Advent to Aëtius. Aëtius was misread as Decius with Valerian's name added from force of habit. The Saxon advent being fixed at A.D. 375, the interval of sixty-nine years to Decius and Valerian brought the compiler down to A.D. 444. He then commences the Chronicle with A.D. 445, on which hypothesis, be it observed, the initial year of the *Annales Cambriae* is of no particular importance.
