

CAERWENT.

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THE recent explorations at Caerwent have resulted in such interesting discoveries, that all antiquaries must regret that so little is known of the early story of the place. History is all but silent with regard to Caerwent, and the only description of the ancient city which has come down to us is contained in the verses attributed to St. Tathan, who lived there in the sixth century :—

“ *Urbs bona, fertilis, ardua, nobilis, Guentoniensis,
Sors mea, dedita gratia celica civibus istis.
Sedula subveniat, que vos defendere curat,
Et nos defendat, qui defendenda gubernat.*”

Which may be thus translated :—

A city that is good, fruitful, lofty, noble—situated
in Gwent,
Which is my lot, and granted by heavenly favour
to its citizens ;
And which constantly affords succour, being careful
to defend you,
And it defends us, and governs those who are to be
defended.

But though history, in the strict sense of the word, tells us little or nothing about the place, we find in the lives of the Welsh Saints so many incidental notices of Caerwent, that by collecting them together we are able to form a very tolerable idea of the place as it was in those early days. After the departure of the Romans, it would appear that Caerwent, like many another Roman town, continued to be a place of importance, and there the kings of Gwent fixed their royal residence and capital. It was probably here that the exiled royal family of Armorica found an asylum at the court

of Meurig, King of Glamorgan, whose three daughters—Anna, Afrella, and Gwenonwy—married three of the exiled princes, while his grandson, Caradog, married their sister, Derfel.

It was during the reign of this latter prince, Caradog, that a holy man named Tathan came to the district of Gwent. His fame soon reached the city of Caerwent—or Venta Silurum, as it was then called—and Caradog, who appears to have been an enlightened ruler, sent messengers to St. Tathan, inviting him to come and settle at Caerwent, or Venta Silurum, “that he might hear from him evangelical exhortations.” But Tathan much preferred the life of a hermit, and answered the messengers: “Your king, if he desires to visit us, may come here, but I will not visit a secular king, nor the large family of a king.” The ambassadors returned with this message to Caradog, who, with a retinue of twenty-four soldiers, at once went to visit the Saint, and by his earnest entreaties and representations of the need of a teacher, persuaded St. Tathan to come to Caerwent. There he took charge of—or more probably founded—a monastic school, or, says the old historian Cressy, “an academy dedicated to the studies of literature, to institute young men in learning and piety.” The citizens were pleased at the coming of St. Tathan, and scholars from all parts flowed to him to be instructed in the knowledge of the seven sciences. The king gave him a field in the suburbs, “which was from the public way to the river Usk, to preach in.” Tathan considered it a suitable place for divine service; and it was not long before, through the donation of Ynyr, “the most noble son of King Caradog,” a church was built there, in honour of the Holy Trinity. Moreover, St. Tathan elected twelve canons, who should visit the church, or oratory, at their respective appointed hours, and keep up the *laus perennis*, the unceasing service of prayer and praise. It was to this church that the body of the martyred maiden, St. Maches, was borne from Llanvaches, the place which took its name from

her death there, and by St. Tathan's desire was buried in the floor of the church.

Soon after this, King Caradog seems to have determined, for some reason or other, to leave Caerwent, and build a palace on the banks of the Severn, and he bestowed the whole city of Caerwent and the adjoining territory upon St. Tathan. The monastic school of Caerwent became famous in all the country round, and many celebrated men were educated there. Among them was the great St. Cadoc, who, at the age of seven, was sent by his father, Gwynlliw the Warrior, King of Gwentlwg, to be brought up and taught by St. Tathan. We get some idea of the studies pursued at Caerwent when we are told, in the "Life of St. Cadoc," that Tathan diligently instructed him in Donatus and Priscian and other arts. Donatus was a well-known grammarian and commentator, who taught grammar and rhetoric at Rome about the middle of the fourth century, and was the instructor of St. Jerome. His Latin grammar was universally used in the schools in the Middle Ages, so that the word "Donat" came, in the West of Europe, to be synonymous with grammar, or with the elements of any science. The mention of Priscian shows that Tathan was a thoroughly "up-to-date" teacher, for Priscian was almost a contemporary of St. Tathan. He was born in Cæsarea, and taught Latin at Constantinople, where he enjoyed a government salary, and he was considered one of the first of Latin grammarians. These facts suggest the idea that Caerwent may still have been in touch with Rome.

We may be sure, too, that religion and philosophy formed a large part of the educational system of Caerwent: as is amply shown by the sayings of St. Cadoc which have come down to us.

Caerwent may also claim the honour of being the birthplace of the great St. Malo, of continental fame, who was baptized by the Abbot Bishop of Caerwent, and carried to the font by no less a person than the far-famed St. Brandan. At the age of twelve he was committed to

the care of St. Brandan ; and it seems highly probable that the seminary over which that Saint presided was the school of Caerwent, since, from the context, it was evidently near the home of St. Malo's father, Caradog. Later on, St. Malo was one of the company who sailed with St. Brandan on that wonderful seven years' voyage, in search of the Promised Land : that journey so well described as "a monkish Odyssey, a dream of the hermit's cell." On St. Malo's return from the voyage the bishopric or abbacy of Caerwent had just become vacant by the death of the bishop, and he was unanimously chosen to fill the vacant office. But the position did not at all suit his retiring disposition, and he resolved to leave the country secretly, and seek a solitude across the sea. His father, King Caradog, however, found out his intentions, and sent orders to every seaport in his kingdom to forbid any vessel to take his son on board. In spite of this, St. Malo contrived to depart, and henceforth his native place knew him no more.

And here we may remark on the mistakes which have arisen owing to the confusion between Venta Silurum and Venta Belgarum. Thus, in the "Life of St. Malo," just referred to, the Breton version of the story says his father ruled at Guic Kastel, the place which "in English is called Winchester," and makes him baptized by the Bishop of Winchester. If we were in any doubt as to whether Winchester or Venta Belgarum were the place intended, our doubts would be set at rest on turning to the French "Life of St. Paul Aurelian." The latter Saint, it is well known, was the son of a Glamorganshire potentate, who lived in the district near Cowbridge anciently known as Penychen. After completing his education, he retired to a spot near his father's estate (and so in Glamorganshire), where he built a monastery, and in course of time was ordained priest by *his diocesan*, the Bishop of "Guic Kastel, called in English Winchester." A bishop of Winchester, in Hants, could not possibly have had any jurisdiction over Glamorganshire.

But the name of Venta has led to still worse confusion as regards the life of St. Cadoc. Many absurd legends have been propagated as to St. Cadoc's sudden translation from Wales to Italy, where he became Bishop of "Beneventum," and was martyred. Even so high an authority as Dom Plaine considers that St. Cadoc met his end at Beneventum, when the Arian king Totilia took that city by storm, in November, 542, and committed all kinds of cruel excesses upon the inhabitants.

Montalembert, whose sound scholarship led him to see the impossibility of the Beneventum story, came nearer the truth in suggesting Weedon, in Northamptonshire, as the place of St. Cadoc's death. But a consideration of the recorded facts will lead to the conclusion that the place was no other than *Venta Silurum*. It is not difficult to imagine that some monkish chronicler, unacquainted with the name of *Venta*, should have metamorphosed it into *Beneventum*. The details given in the "Life of St. Cadoc" state that, whilst living at his monastery of Llanancarvan, he was warned in a vision that he must shortly leave it for another sphere of work. He appointed his favourite disciple, Elli, to be head of the monastery in his place, and immediately afterwards he was transported (in a cloud) to Beneventum. The bishop of that place had just died, and St. Cadoc was made bishop in his stead. It would be very natural that the bishopric of Caerwent being vacant, it should be given to St. Cadoc, who had been connected with the place from a child. It certainly must have been some town within easy reach of Llanancarvan, for, says the narrative, Elli was accustomed to go very often from Llanancarvan, with his disciples, to the city of Beneventum, to visit the blessed Cadoc. Moreover, though it is not positively stated in the Latin "Life of Cadoc," that his murderers were Saxons, yet such is the unvarying tradition, on the authority of the *Chronicle of Quimperlé* (now in the possession of Lady Beaumont, at Carlton Towers, York-

shire), and also according to the inscription on a tablet in the chapel of St. Cadoc, near Entel, in Brittany.

Assuming that Beneventum is identical with Venta Silurum, we are at once put in possession of further interesting details respecting Caerwent. We learn that it was a walled town, for St. Cadoc caused the wall of "Beneventum" to be repaired, and at his command a spring of water gushed forth to supply the workmen with water for their task. Also we are furnished with additional information as to the church there, for during some of the visits of Elli and the disciples of Llan-carvan to St. Cadoc, some of the said disciples died, and were honourably buried in the monastery there, "whose sepulchres are placed together in one series, in order before the altar, from one wall to another. Eight very decent marble monuments," says the chronicler, "may be found there."

And what interest is added to the associations of Caerwent if we may believe that within its walls was enacted the closing scenes of St. Cadoc's career: a grand and noble ending to a grand and noble life. Warned by a vision that his end was near, St. Cadoc heard without fear of the approach of a horde of heathen invaders; and resolved, like the Roman sentinel, to die at his post, he entered his monastery, and for the last time celebrated the Holy Eucharist. It was as he stood at the altar, clad in his ecclesiastical vestments, that the savage Saxon band burst into the church; but the Saint, unmoved, continued to proceed with the sacred office. A Saxon chief, who had ridden into the church, urged forward his horse, and brandishing his lance went up to St. Cadoc, and struck him to the heart. He fell on his knees, and his last desire, his last thought, were for his dear countrymen. "Lord," he said, while dying, "invisible King, Saviour Jesus, grant me one grace: protect the Christians of my country, let their trees still bear fruit, their fields give corn; fill them with goods and blessings; and, above all, be merciful to them, that after having honoured Thee on

earth, they may glorify Thee in Heaven" (see Montalembert).

The Saxon victory seems to have been short-lived. The havoc they had wrought was repaired. St. Cadoc was buried in the monastery, where he had met his end, and the monastic school continued to flourish. Here St. Meen, a well-known saint in Brittany, is said to have been brought up, and hither in the latter part of the sixth century was sent St. Beuno, a saint of royal descent, to receive his education from the learned St. Tanguisius, who was then at the head of the school of Caerwent. Though St. Beuno spent most of his life in North Wales, he seems to have kept up his connection with Caerwent, for in his "Life" we read of a workman being sent from Anglesey, where St. Beuno was then living, to assist in the building of the palace of King Ynyr of Gwent. And the same monarch's daughter, Digwc, found a refuge with St. Beuno in North Wales after her unhappy marriage; and her brother Iddon, afterwards King of Gwent, came up there to visit St. Beuno and his sister.

After this we hear nothing of Caerwent till the tenth century, when it appears to have still been a somewhat important place. For in 955 a quarrel took place between a certain deacon and the retainers of King Nowi, resulting in the murder of the deacon in his church. The Bishop of Llandaff, Pater, was then in the region of Brecon; but when tidings of these evil deeds reached him, he sent messengers to the monasteries of all the provinces of his whole diocese, ordering the priests, deacons and clergy of all degrees to meet together. Nowi, hearing with his nobles that the malediction of the whole church was rushing and falling upon him, would not dare to sustain such a weight of malediction, but entered into counsel with the most learned men of his country, and, sending messengers, called the bishop to him. And afterwards Nowi, and the bishop with his nobles, met together in the *city of Gwent*. And there the offenders made grants of land

to the See of Llandaff; and the bishop arose in the midst, and they all stood near him, holding the Gospel. And he said to Nowi, "Lay thy hand on this Gospel." And Nowi placed his hand on the Gospel, and said: "May this land with its inhabitants be in eternal consecration to God and to St. Dubritius, and St. Teilo and St. Oudoceus, and Bishop Pater, and to all the Bishops of Llandaff for ever."

Also, during the episcopate of the same bishop, one Bledrwys, when dying, gave a place called *Caer Nonou* to the See of Llandaff; and the grant was witnessed by Bishop Pater and "*Guorgonui, filius Gurnetu, Abbas Guentonix urbis.*"

Another deed in the same century was witnessed by *Jeuan*, son of *Rhun*, priest of *Caerwent*; and in the latter part of the eleventh century a deed was witnessed by *Eidef*, Reader of the City of *Gwent*.

From the eleventh century downwards, the fortunes of the place gradually declined; until the once royal city of *Venta Silurum*, with its palace, its public buildings, its academy, and its villas with tessellated pavements, became the humble village of *Caerwent*.
