

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Of the present volume it will be sufficient to inform the reader that it contains Six Chronicles, all relating to the history of this country before the Norman Conquest, and all of essential importance to those who like to study history in the very words of contemporary writers. We will at once proceed to enumerate them severally.

Chap 1. — ETHELWERD'S CHRONICLE

The short chronicle, which passes under the name of Ethelwerd, contains few facts which are not found in the Saxon Chronicle its precursor. Of the author we know no more than he has told us in his work. "Malmesbury calls him 'noble and magnificent' with reference to his rank; for he was descended from king Alfred: but he forgets his peculiar praise — that of being the only Latin historian for two centuries; though, like Xenophon, Caesar, and Alfred, he wielded the sword as much as the pen."

Ethelwerd dedicated his work to, and indeed wrote it for the use of his relation Matilda, daughter of Otto the Great, emperor of Germany, by his first empress Edgitha or Edith; who is mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle, p. 925, though not by name, as given to Otto by her brother, king Aethelstan. Ethelwerd adds, in his epistle to Matilda, that Aethelstan sent two sisters, in order that the emperor might take his choice; and that he preferred the mother of Matilda.

The chronology of Ethelwerd is occasionally a year or two at variance with other authorities. The reader will be guided in reckoning the dates, not by the heading of each paragraph, a.p. 891, 975, *etc.*, but by the actual words of the author inserted in the body of the text. I have translated this short chronicle from the original text as well as I was able, and as closely as could be to the author's text; but I am by no means certain of having always succeeded in hitting on his true meaning, for such is the extraordinary barbarism of the style, that I believe many an ancient Latin classic, if he could rise from his grave, would attempt in vain to interpret it.

Chap. II — ASSER'S LIFE OF ALFRED

This work is ascribed, on its own internal authority, to Asser, who is said to have been bishop of St. David's, of Sherborne or of Exeter, in the time of king Alfred. Though most of the public events recorded in this book are to be found in the Saxon Chronicle, yet for many interesting circumstances in the life of our great Saxon king we are indebted to this biography alone. But, as if no part of history is ever to be free from suspicion, or from difficulty, a doubt has been raised concerning the authenticity of this work. There is also another short

treatise called the Annals of Asser, or the Chronicle of St. Neot, different from the present: it is published in vol. iii. of Gale and Fell's Collection of Historians. And it has been suspected by a living writer that both of these works are to be looked upon as compilations of a later date. The arguments upon which this opinion is founded are drawn principally from the abrupt and incoherent character of the work before us. But we have neither time nor space to enter further into this question. As the work has been edited by Petrie, so has it been here translated, and the reader, taking it upon its own merits, will find therein much of interest about our glorious king, concerning whom he will lament with me that all we know is so little, so unsatisfying.

Chap. III — GILDAS

Of Gildas, the supposed author of the third work contained in this volume, little or nothing is known. Mr. Stevenson, in the preface to his edition of the original Latin, lately published by the English Historical Society, says: "We are unable to speak with certainty as to his parentage, his country, or even his name, the period when he lived, or the works of which he was the author." Such a statement is surely sufficient to excuse us at present from saying more on the subject, than that he is supposed to have lived, and to have written what remains under his name, during some part of the sixth century. There are two legends of the life of St. Gildas, as he is termed, but both of them abound with such absurdities that they scarcely deserve to be noticed in a serious history. Of the present translation, the first or historic half is entirely new; in the rest, consisting almost entirely of texts from Scripture, the translator has thought it quite sufficient to follow the old translation of Habington, correcting whatever errors he could detect, and in some degree relieving the quaint and obsolete character of the language. It has been remarked by Polydore Virgil, that Gildas quotes no other book but the Bible; and it may be added, that his quotations are in other words than those of the Vulgate or common authorized translation. The title of the old translation is as follows: "*The Epistle of Gildas the most ancient British Author: who flourished in the yeere of our Lord, 546. And who by his great erudition, sanctitie, and wisdom, acquired the name of Sapiens. Faithfully translated out of the originall Latine.*" London, 12mo. 1638.

Chap. IV — NENNIUS

The History of the Britons, which occupies the fourth place in this volume is generally ascribed to Nennius, but so little is known about the author, that we have hardly any information handed down to us respecting him except this mention of his name. It is also far from certain at what period the history was written, and the difference is no less than a period of two hundred years, some assigning the work to seven hundred and ninety-six, and others to nine hundred and ninety-four. The recent inquiries of Mr. Stevenson, to be found in the Preface to his new edition of the original Latin, render it unnecessary at

present to delay the reader's attention from the work itself. The present translation is substantially that of the Rev. W. Gunn, published with the Latin original in 1819, under the following title: "*The 'Historia Britonum,' commonly attributed to Nennius; from a manuscript lately discovered in the library of the Vatican Palace at Rome: edited in the tenth century, by Mark the Hermit; with an English version, fac-simile of the original, notes and illustrations.*" The kindness of that gentleman has enabled the present editor to reprint the whole, with only a few corrections of slight errata, which inadvertency alone had occasioned, together with the two prologues and several pages of genealogies, which did not occur in the MS. used by that gentleman.

Chap. V. — GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

Geoffrey, surnamed of Monmouth, is celebrated in English literature as the author, or at least the translator, of *Historia Britonum*, a work from which nearly all our great vernacular poets have drawn the materials for some of their noblest works of fiction and characters of romance. He lived in the early part of the twelfth century, and in the year 1152 was raised to the bishopric of St. Asaph.

The first of his writings, in point of time, was a Latin translation of the *Prophecies of Merlin*, which he undertook at the request of Alexander bishop of Lincoln. His next work was that on which his fame principally rests, the *Historia Britonum*, dedicated to Robert, duke of Gloucester, who died in 1147. Into this second work he inserted the Latin translation above-mentioned, which now appears as the seventh book of *Historia Britonum*. A third composition has also been ascribed to Geoffrey, entitled *Vita Merlini*, in Latin hexameter verse: but the internal evidence which it affords, plainly proves that it is the work of a different author.

Although the list of our Chroniclers may be considered as complete, without the addition of this work, yet we have thought it worthy of a place in our series for many reasons. It is not for historical accuracy that the book before us is valuable; for the great mass of scholars have come to the decided conviction that it is full of fables. But it is the romantic character which pervades the narrative, together with its acknowledged antiquity, which make it desirable that the book should not sink into oblivion. Those who desire to possess it as a venerable relic of an early age, will now have an opportunity of gratifying their wish; whilst others, who despise it as valueless, in their researches after historic truth, may, nevertheless, find some little pleasure in the tales of imagination which it contains.

The value of this work is best evinced by the attention which was paid to it for many centuries; Henry of Huntingdon made an abstract of it, which he subjoined as an appendix to his history: and Alfred of Beverley, a later writer, in his abridgment of this work which still exists, has omitted Geoffrey's name, though he calls the author of the original, Britannicus.

An English translation of the work was first published by Aaron Thompson, of Queen's College, Oxford, [8vo. Lond. 1718,] and lately revised and reprinted by the editor of this volume. [8vo. Lond. 1842.] A long preface is prefixed to that translation, wherein the author endeavoured to prove Geoffrey of Monmouth to be a more faithful historian than he is generally considered to be. His words are as follow: — "I am not unsensible that I expose myself to the censures of some persons, by publishing this translation of a book, which they think had better been suppressed and buried in oblivion, as being at present generally exploded for a groundless and fabulous story, such as our modern historians think not worthy relating, or at least mention with contempt. And though it is true, several men, and those of learning too, censure this book who have but little considered it, and whose studies no ways qualify them to judge of it; yet, I own this consideration has for a long time deterred me from publishing it: and I should not at last have been able to surmount this difficulty, without the importunity and encouragement of others, to whom I owe a singular regard. I had indeed before I entered upon the work perused the principal writers both for and against this history, the effect of which upon my own judgment, as to the swaying it to the - side more than the other, was but very small; and I must confess, that I find the most learned antiquaries the most modest in their opinions concerning it, and that it seems to me to be a piece of great rashness, to judge peremptorily upon a matter, whereof at this great distance of time there are no competent witnesses on either side. At least I cannot but think it a sufficient apology for my publishing this book, to consider only, that though it seems to suffer under a general prejudice at present, yet it has not long done so; but that upon its first appearing in the world, it met with a universal approbation, and that too, from those who had better opportunities of examining the truth of it, as there were then more monuments extant; and the traditions more fresh and uncorrupted concerning the ancient British affairs, than any critics of the present age can pretend to; that it had no adversary before William of Newburgh about the end of the reign of Richard the First, whose virulent inveective against it, we are told, proceeded from a revenge he thought he owed the Welsh for an affront they had given him; that his opposition was far from shaking the credit of it with our succeeding historians, who have, most of them, till the beginning of the last century, confirmed it with their testimonies, and copied after it, as often as they had occasion to treat of the same affairs: that its authority was alleged by king Edward the First and all the nobility of the kingdom, in a controversy of the greatest importance, before Boniface the Eighth; that even in this learned age, that is so industrious to detect any impostures, which through the credulity of former times had passed upon the world, the arguments against this history are not thought so convincing, but that several men of equal reputation for learning and judgment with its adversaries, have written in favour of it; that very few have at last spoken decisively against it, or absolutely condemned it; and that it is still most frequently quoted by our most learned historians and antiquaries. All these considerations, I say, if they do not amount to an apology for the history itself, show at least that it deserves to be better known than at present it is; which is sufficient to justify my undertaking the publishing of it."

It is unnecessary in the present day to prove that king Brute is a shadowy personage, who never existed but in the regions of romance: but as the reader may justly expect to find in this place some account of the controversy which has existed respecting this work, the following remarks will not be deemed inappropriate. There seems no good reason for supposing that Geoffrey of Monmouth intended to deceive the world respecting the history of which he professed to be the translator; and it may be readily conceived that he did no more than fulfil the task which he had undertaken, of rendering the book into Latin out of the original language. But those who, even as late as the beginning of the last century, supported the authenticity of the history, have grounded their opinions on such arguments as the following: —

1. That, upon its first appearance in the world, the book met with universal approbation, and that too from those who had better opportunities of examining the truth of it, as there were then more monuments extant, and the traditions were more fresh and uncorrupted, concerning the ancient British affairs, than any critics of the present age can pretend to.
2. That except William of Newburgh, about the end of the reign of Richard I, it met with no opponents even down to the seventeenth century, but was, on the contrary, quoted by all, in particular by Edward I, in a controversy before Boniface the Eighth.
3. That we see in this history the traces of venerable antiquity.
4. That the story of Brute, and the descent of the Britons from the Trojans, was universally allowed by Giraldus Cambrensis and others, and was opposed for the first time by John of Wethamstede [Nicolson's Eng. Hist. Lit. 2nd ed. p: 1, c. v.], who lived in the 15th century: that Polydore Virgil's contempt for it proceeded from his wish to preserve unimpaired the glory of the Romans, and Buchanan's observations betray his ignorance of the story.
5. That Leland, who lived under Henry the Eighth, Humphrey Lhwyd, Sir John Price, Dr. Caius, Dr. Powel. and others, have supported the story of Brute, *etc.*

Such arguments may have satisfied the credulous students of the seventeenth century, but the more enlightened criticism of the present day will no longer listen to them. It may not, however, be uninteresting to hear the account which the English translator gives of this work, which, in his own words, and with his additional remarks upon it, is as follows: — “The story, as collected from himself, Leland, Bale, and Pitts, is that Walter Mapes, *alias* Calenius, archdeacon of Oxford, who flourished in the reign of Henry I, and of whom Henry of Huntingdon, and other historians as well as Geoffrey himself, make honourable mention, being a man very curious in the study of antiquity, and a diligent searcher into ancient libraries, and especially after the works of ancient authors, happened while he was in Armorica to light upon a History of Britain, written in the British tongue, and carrying marks of great antiquity.

And being overjoyed at it, as if he had found a vast treasure, he in a short time after came over to England; where inquiring for a proper person to translate this curious but hitherto unknown book, he very opportunely met with Geoffrey of Monmouth, a man profoundly versed in the history and antiquities of Britain, excellently skilled in the British tongue, and withal (considering the time), an elegant writer both in verse and prose; and so recommended this task to him. Accordingly, Geoffrey, being incredibly delighted with this ancient book, undertook the translating of it into Latin, which he performed, with great diligence, approving himself, according to Matthew Paris, a faithful translator. At first he divided it into four books, written in a plain simple style, and dedicated it to Robert, earl of Gloucester, a copy whereof is said to be at Bennet College, in Cambridge, which was never yet published; but afterwards he made some alterations and divided it into eight books, to which he added the book of Merlin's Prophecies, which he had also translated from British verse into Latin prose, prefixing to it a preface, and a letter to Alexander, bishop of Lincoln. A great many fabulous and trifling stories are inserted in the history: but that was not his fault; his business as a translator was to deliver them faithfully such as they were, and leave them to the judgment of the learned to be discussed.

“To prove the truth of this relation, and to answer at once all objections against Geoffrey's integrity, one needs no other argument than, an assurance that the original manuscript which Geoffrey translated, of whose antiquity the curious are able to judge in a great measure by the character, or any ancient and authentic copy of it, is yet extant. And indeed, archbishop Usher mentions an old Welsh Chronicle in the Cottonian Library, that formerly was in the possession of that learned antiquary, Humphrey Lhwyd, which he says is thought to be that which Geoffrey translated. But if that be the original manuscript, it must be acknowledged that Geoffrey was not merely a translator, but made some additions of his own: since, as that most learned prelate informs us, the account that we have in this History of the British Flamens, and Archflamens, is nowhere to be found in it. But besides this, there are several copies of it in the Welsh tongue, mentioned by the late ingenious and learned Mr. Lhwyd in his *'Archeologia Britannica'*. And I myself have met with a manuscript history of our British affairs, written above a hundred years ago by Mr. John Lewis, and shortly to be published, wherein the author says, that he had the original of the British History in parchment written in the British tongue before Geoffrey's time, as he concludes from this circumstance, that in his book Geoffrey's preface was wanting, and the preface to his book was the second chapter of that published by Geoffrey. My ignorance of the Welsh tongue renders me unqualified for making any search into these matters; and though the search should be attended with never so much satisfaction, to those who are able to judge of the antiquity of manuscripts, yet to the generality of readers, other arguments would perhaps be more convincing.”

The passages which we have here quoted at length, will give the reader the most ample information concerning the nature of the question, and it only remains to inform the reader what is my own opinion on this long-agitated literary controversy.

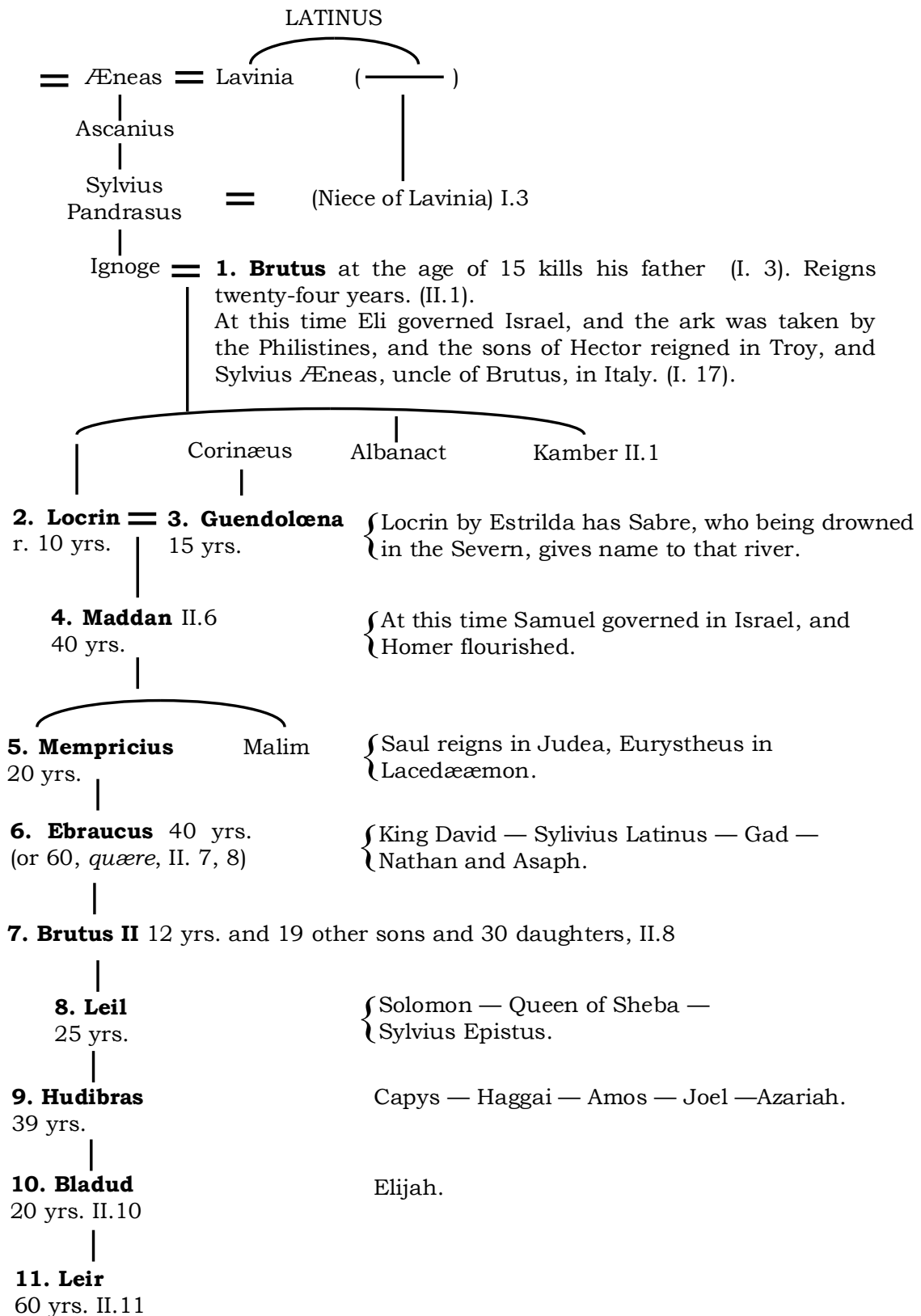
To those who have read the plain and simple statements of Julius Cesar and the other classic historians who have described the early state of Britain, it will be morally certain that all such accounts as we have in Geoffrey of Monmouth are purely fabulous. The uncertainty of every thing, save the bare fact, connected with the siege of Troy, is so great, that to connect its fortunes with those of a distant and at that time unheard-of island like Britain, can be admissible only in the pages of romance. But in the latter part of the work which contains the history of Britain, during its conquest by the Saxons, we may possibly find the germs of facts unnoticed elsewhere.

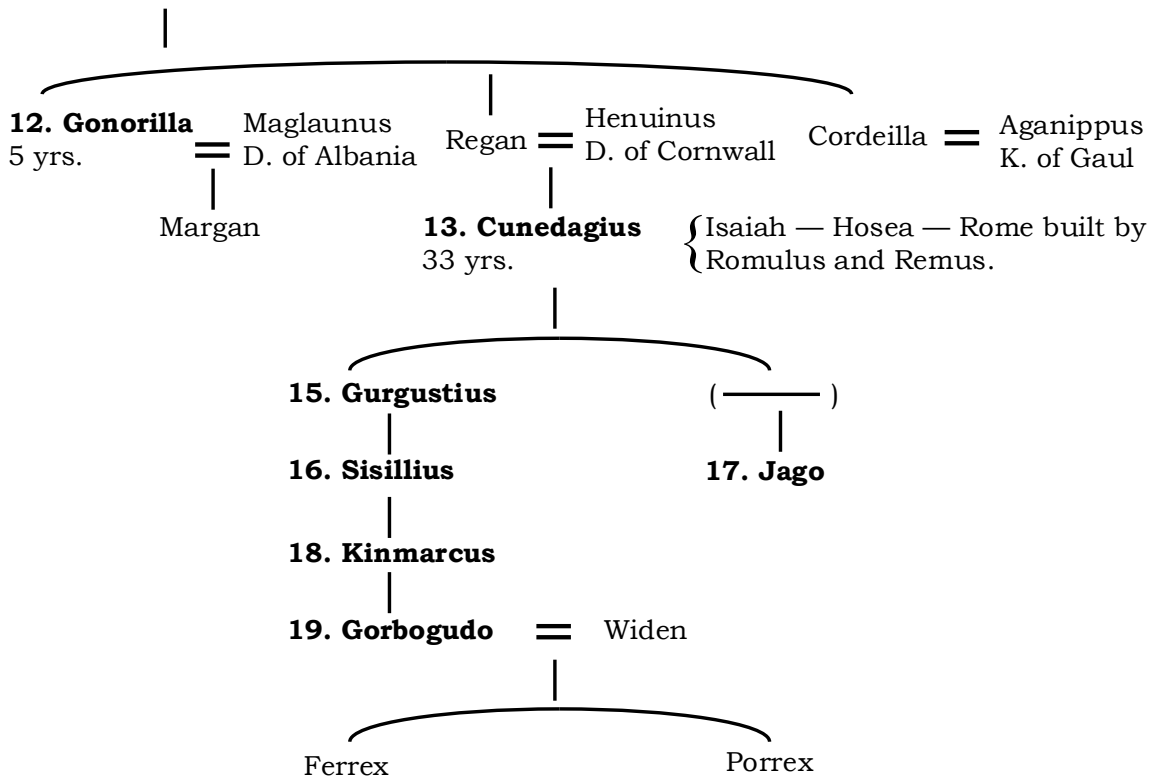
This view does not militate against the veracity of Geoffrey, who professes to have translated from an original in the British language, but whether any manuscript copy of this original now exists, is a point which has not been satisfactorily ascertained. In 1811, the Rev. Peter Roberts published the *Chronicle of the Kings of Britain*, translated from Welsh manuscripts, and being in substance almost identically the same as Geoffrey's *History of the Britons* — but it is most likely that these Welsh MSS., which are all comparatively modern, are themselves re-translations from the Latin of Geoffrey.

If no other arguments could be adduced to prove the utter incredibility of the earlier parts of this history, the following Chronological Table would furnish quite sufficient arguments to establish it, by the extraordinary anachronisms which it contains. For instance, between the reigns of Brutus and Leil, is an interval of 156 years; and yet Geoffrey makes the capture of the ark contemporaneous with the reign of Brutus, and the building of Solomon's temple with that of Leil. Now the interval between these two events cannot by any possibility be extended beyond eighty years. It is, moreover, impossible to bring the chronology of the British kings themselves into harmony with the dates before Christ, as there is no mention made of the exact interval between the taking of Troy and Brutus's landing in Britain.

Geoffrey inscribes his work to Robert, earl of Gloucester, son of Henry the Second.

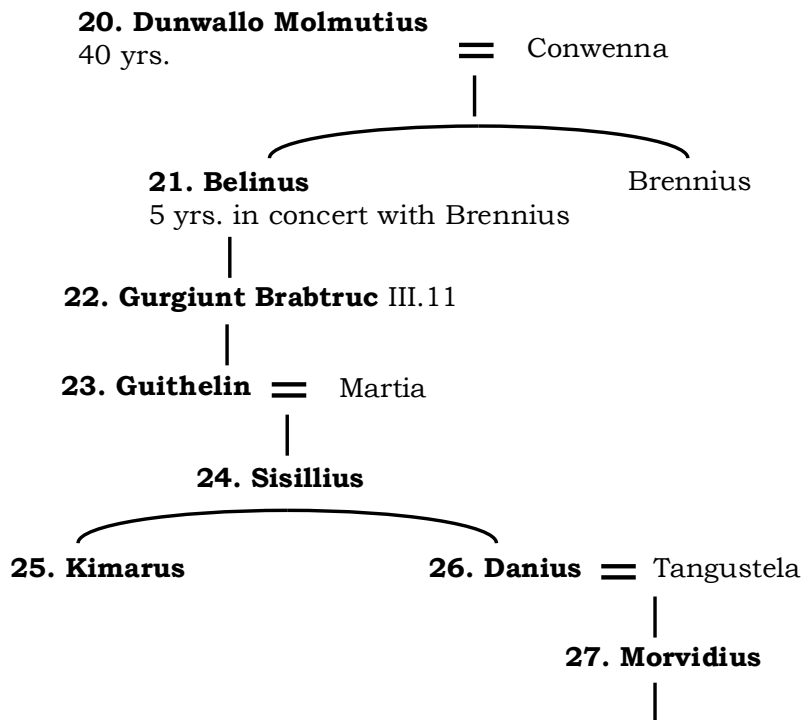
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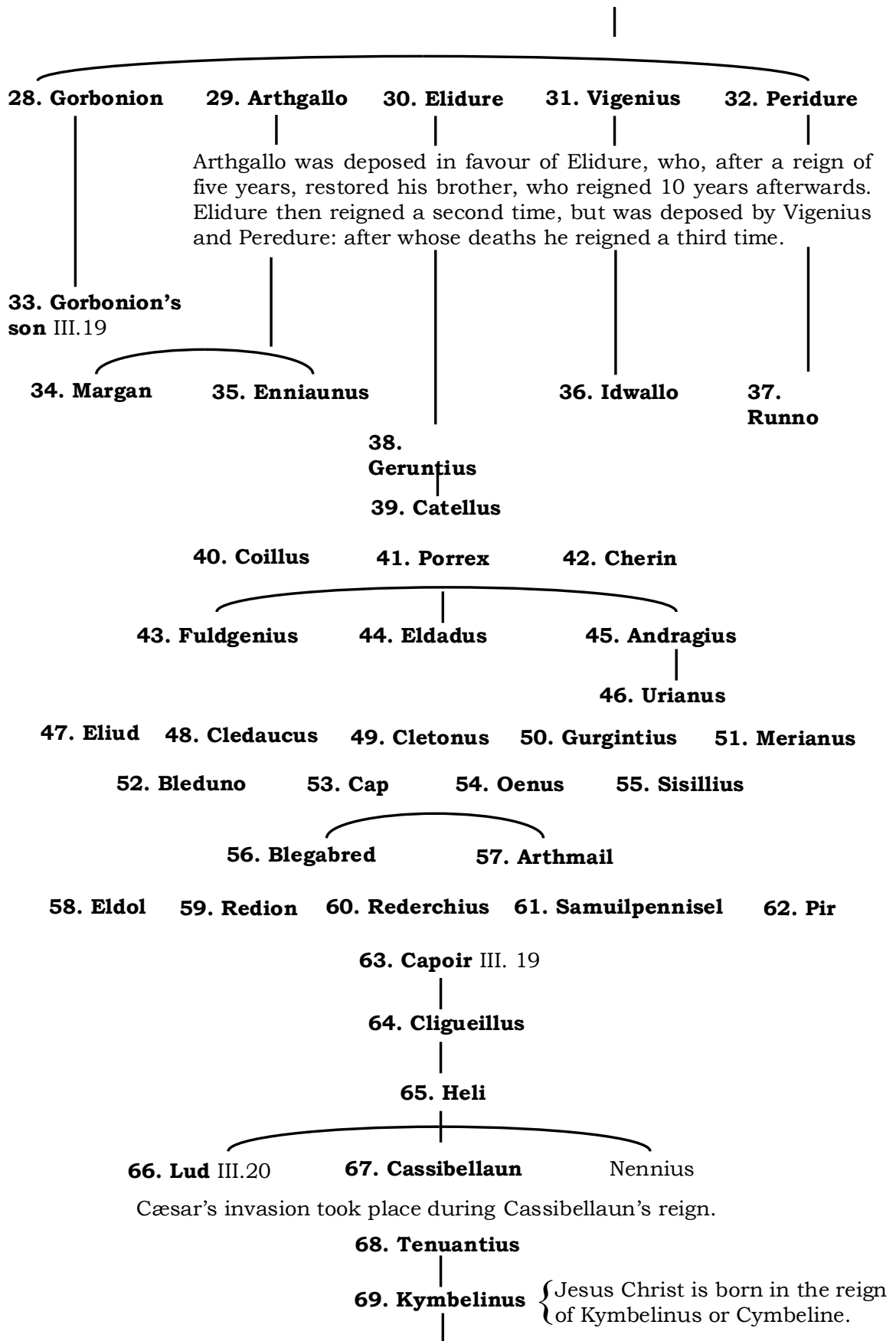




Long Civil Wars

At length arose Dunwallo Molmutius, son of Cloten, king of Cornwall. II. 17.





Chap. VI — RICHARD OF CIRENCESTER

Richard, surnamed from his birthplace Richard of Cirencester, flourished from the middle to the latter end of the fourteenth century. No traces of his family or connections can be discovered; though they were at least of respectable condition, for he received an education which in his time was far beyond the attainment of the inferior ranks of society. In 1350 he entered into the Benedictine monastery of St. Peter, Westminster, during the abbacy of Nicholas de Lytlington, as appears from the rolls of the abbey; and his name occurs in various documents of that establishment in the years 1387, 1397, and 1399.

He devoted his leisure hours to the study of British and Anglo-Saxon history and antiquities, in which he made such proficiency that he is said to have been honoured with the name of the Historiographer. Pitts informs us, without specifying his authority, that Richard visited different libraries and ecclesiastical establishments in England in order to collect materials. It is at least certain that he obtained a licence to visit Rome, from his abbat, William of Colchester, in 1391; and there can be little doubt that a man of so industrious, observant, and sagacious a character profited by this journey to extend his historical and antiquarian knowledge, and to augment his collections. This license is given by Stukeley from the communication of Mr. Widmore, librarian of Westminster, and bears honourable testimony to the morals and piety of our author, and his regularity in performing the discipline of his order. He probably performed this journey in the interval between 1391 and 1397, for he appears to have been confined in the abbey infirmary in 1401, and died in that or the following year. His remains were doubtlessly interred in the cloisters of the abbey, but we cannot expect to find any memorial of a simple monk. We have abundant cause to regret that he was restrained in the pursuit of his favourite studies, by the authority of his abbat. In the seventh chapter of his first book he enters into a spirited justification of himself, but from the preface to his chronology he appears to have found it necessary to submit his better judgment to the will of his superior. His works are—*Historia ab Hengisto ad Ann. 1348*, in two parts. The first contains the period from the coming of the Saxons to the death of Harold, and is preserved in the public library of the University of Cambridge, Ff. i, 28. Whitaker, the historian of Manchester, thus speaks of it :— “The hope of meeting with discoveries as great in the Roman, British, and Saxon history as he has given us concerning the preceding period, induced me to examine the work. But my expectations were greatly disappointed. The learned scholar and the deep antiquarian I found sunk into an ignorant novice, sometimes the copier of Huntingdon, but generally the transcriber of Geoffrey. Deprived of his Roman guides, Richard showed himself as ignorant and as injudicious as any of his illiterate contemporaries about him.”

The second part is probably a manuscript contained in the library of the Royal Society, p. 137, with the title of *Britonum Anglorum et Saxonum Historia*. In the Library of Bennet Coll. Cambridge, is *Epitome Chron. Ric. Cor. West. Lib.*

I. Other works of our author are supposed to be preserved in the Lambeth Library, and at Oxford.

His theological writings were — *Tractatus super Symbolum Majus et Minus*, and *Liber de Officiis Ecclesiasticis* — in the Peterborough Library.

But the treatise to which Richard owes his celebrity is that now presented to the reader. Its first discoverer was Charles Julius Bertram, Professor of the English Language in the Royal Marine Academy at Copenhagen, who transmitted to the celebrated antiquary, Doctor Stukeley, a transcript of the whole in letters, together with a copy of the map. From this transcript Stukeley published an analysis of the work, with the Itinerary, first in a thin quarto, in 1757, and afterwards in the second volume of his *Itinerarium Curiosum*. In the same year the original itself was published by Professor Bertram at Copenhagen, in a small octavo volume, with the remains of Gildas and Nennius, under this title — *Britannicarum Gentium Historæ -Antiquæ Scriptores tres: Ricardus Corinensis, Gildas Badonicus, Nennius Banchorensis, etc.* Of this treatise Bertram thus speaks in his preface: “The work of Richard of Cirencester, which came into my possession in an extraordinary manner with many other curiosities, is not entirely complete, yet its author is not to be classed with the most inconsiderable historians of the middle age. It contains many fragments of a better time, which would now in vain be sought for elsewhere; and all are useful to the antiquary * * * * It is considered by Dr. Stukeley, and those who have inspected it, as a jewel, and worthy to be rescued from destruction by the press. From respect for him I have caused it to be printed.”

Of the map Bertram observes: “I have added a very ancient map of Roman Britain, skilfully drawn according to the accounts of the ancients, which in rarity and antiquity excels the rest of the Commentary of Richard.”

This map, however, as no longer of use in an age when so much light has been thrown on its subject, has been omitted.