§32. In [Vortigern's] time Saint Germanus, renowned for his many virtues, came to preach in Britain, and through him many were saved, and very many perished. I shall write of some miracles which God performed through him.

The first of his miracles. There was a certain king, very unjust and tyrannical, whose name was Benili. The holy man wished to visit him, and hastened to the unjust king that he might preach to him. But when the man of God came to the gate of the 

servi with his companion, the porter came and greeted them, and they sent him to the king. The king gave them a dole answer, saying, with an oath, "If having come they wait until the end of the year, they shall never gain access to the interior of my 

servi." While they waited for the porter to announce the tyrant's pronouncement to them the day was ending and evening and night approached, and they did not know where to go. Meanwhile one of the servi of the king came out of the interior of the 

servi and bowed to the man of God, and announced to them all the words of the tyrant. He invited them into his own house and they went with him and were kindly received. And he had no livestock of any sort except one cow with a calf, and he killed the calf and cooked it and set it before them. Saint Germanus commanded that not a bone of it should be broken, and so it was done. On the morrow the calf was found before his mother, healthy, alive and unharmed.

§33. Again in the morning they arose and sought audience with the tyrant but while they were waiting and praying next to the gate of the sax [fort], behold, a man came running with sweat pouring down from his head to the soles of his feet. He bowed before them and St Germanus said, "Do you believe in the Holy Trinity?" and he replied "I believe!", he was baptised and he kissed him. And he said to him "Go in peace, in this hour you will die and the angels of the God are waiting for you in the air, and you will proceed with them to God, in whom you have believed." Then
he joyfully entered the *ars* and was seized and bound by the prefect and led before the tyrant and he was slain. It was the custom with that vile tyrant that those who did not arrive before the rising of the sun, to do service in the *ars*, were executed. And they waited the whole day by the gate of the *civitas* but were not admitted to greet the tyrant.

§34. As was his wont, the aforementioned *servus* remained and Saint Germanus said to him, "Take care that not one man of your men remains this night in the *ars*." And he returned to the *ars* and led out his sons, who were nine in number, and they returned to the aforementioned house with him. And Saint Germanus commanded that they observe a fast with the doors closed and he said, "Be on your guard and, whatever you do, do not look upon the *ars*, but pray ceaselessly and call loudly upon your God." And, shortly after nightfall, fire fell from heaven and burnt the *ars*, and all the men who were with the tyrant, and, to this day, they have not reappeared; and the *ars* has not been rebuilt to this day.

§35. In the morning, that man who had given them hospitality believed and was baptised along with all his sons and the whole district. His name was Cadell, and he blessed him, saying also, "A king of your seed shall not be wanting" (that is Cadell Dyrmnlog) "and you alone shall be king from this day." And so it transpired, and the word of the prophet came to pass, who said "He raiseth up the poor out of the dust and lietheth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may sit with princes and occupy a throne of glory" [1 Samuel 2:8] Just as St Germanus said, he became a king and all his sons became kings, and from their seed all Powys is ruled to this day.

So chapters 32 to 35 of the early ninth-century Cambro-Latin text *Historia Brittonum* describe the rise to power of the dynasty of Cadell Dyrmnlog who ruled much of eastern Wales at the time of writing (my translation; see also, Morris 1986; Rowley 2005). As such it is a fairly typical dynastic origin legend, in which a man of humble birth, or in some stories a returning exile, receives the kingdom for himself and his descendants as a result of displaying better moral judgement than the incumbent king. This particular narrative is set during Late Antiquity, and the Germanus of this tale is to be identified with the bishop of Auxerre, in Gaul, who is known to have visited Britain in AD 429 to combat the Pelagian heresy (Thompson 1984). Elements of such stories may vary to reflect the specifics of the time of composition. In this case, for example, the attribution of nine sons to Cadell, the slave who will be king, may provide a clue as to the extent of Powys at the time this story was written down. By analogy with other such stories it seems likely that a more expanded version of the tale would have identified the sons as the ancestors of the ruling houses of the constituent parts of Powys, its *cantrefi*. At its greatest extent Powys comprised 13 *cantrefi*, stretching from the valley of the Dee to the valley of the Wye, but according
to *Historia Brittonum* (chapter 49) the southern portion of this territory, *Rhug Gwy a Hafren*, 'between Wye and Severn', was ruled in the early ninth century by a dynasty claiming descent not from Cadell but from Gwrtheryn (Vortigern). These lands, in the basin of the Wye, comprised the four *cantrefi* of Gwrtherynion, Elfael, Maclenydd and Buellt (Builth). Removing the *cantrefi* of the Wye basin from Powys we are left with the six *cantrefi* of the Severn Valley (Mochnant, Cyfelliog, Arwysili, Caereinion, Mechain and Cedewain) and the three of the Dee (Maelor, Swydd y Waun and Penllyn), giving a total of nine, equal to the sum of Cadell's sons.

Within the story of Germanus, Cadell and Benlli cited above seem, however, to be more localised geographical references. Though Benlli himself does not appear in other historical writings nor in any of the many medieval Welsh genealogical tracts, and elsewhere survives only as a folkloric giant (Bartram 1999), he is memorialised toponymically in the hillfort known as Moel Fenlli (also Foel Fenlli) in the Clwydian Hills (34). The modern Offa's Dyke path curves around its ramparts though it lies somewhat to the west of any of the earthworks traditionally associated with the Mercian king. Moel Fenlli is the highest of several hillforts in the Clwydian range, at 513m, and its ramparts enclose an area of about 9.7ha (CPAT nd). Excavations of a limited nature were carried out in 1879 and much of the interpretation of the site is based on plausible analogy with better excavated sites in the neighbourhood such as Moel Hiraddug, Dinorben and Pen y Cordain (Gale 1991). It seems likely that Moel Fenlli is, like its neighbours, a multiphase construction of the Iron Age, although the nineteenth-century excavations recovered some material of the Roman period dating to perhaps as late as the fourth century. Many hut platforms are still visible in the interior of the fort but, as with all such sites, the interpretation of its status and function is open to debate.

Standing on the watershed of the Clwydian range, Moel Fenlli also stands on an historical boundary. Although fairly central to the modern County of Clwyd, this unit was itself a creation of the 1974 local government reorganisation in England and Wales and prior to this the watershed had, at this point, formed the boundary between Flintshire and Denbighshire. During the Middle Ages its function as a boundary was more clearly defined for the eastern side of the hills, at this point, dividing the *cumud* (commote) of Íl (Yale), in Powys, from the *cantref* of Dyffryn Clwyd, in Gwynedd. Strictly speaking, the hillfort itself lies in the parish of Llanbedr-Dyffryn-Clwyd, to the west, but our narrative from *Historia Brittonum* suggests an ancient connection with Íl and the east. The parish on this side of the mountain is Llanaran-yn-Íl and the church there was the original mother church of the *cumud*. The secular centre of the *cumud*, the *maerdy*, lay some 3km east of the church, across the river Alyn, at the site known today as *Tomen-y-Faerdrin* (Jones 1991). Llanaran is the *llan*, or 'church precinct', of Garmon, the vernacular form of the name Germanus. According to Wade-Evans (1910) there were nine churches in Wales dedicated to Saint Garmon, whose feast was celebrated on 31 July. Three of these churches lay in Gwynedd but
the other six all lay in Powys and of these three lay in northern Powys at Llanarmon-yn-Iâl, Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog and Llanarmon Mynydd Mawr. In mid-Powys lay Llanarmon-yn-Fechain (now Llanfechain) and Castell Caereinion. In the south the chief church of Cantref Gwrtheyrnion, now known as St Harmon, was also dedicated to Garmon. The distribution of these churches in the heartlands of the kings of Powys would seem to confirm the link between the dynasty and the cult of Garmon suggested by the story of Cadell and Benlli. The one Powysian outlier, St Harmon,
lies significantly in Gwrtheyrnion, the cantref which bears the dynastic name of the original dynasty of the Wye Valley. Possibly the cult there was an imposition from the north at a time of dynastic change.

Returning to Llanarmon-yn-Il, the present gate to the churchyard faces north and frames Moel Penlliri on the horizon five kilometres away. As both a landscape feature and as a monument of human activity, the hill, as seen from the church, remains an impressive sight today. In the early Middle Ages its impact would surely have been even more significant. It seems likely that the story of the destruction of the fortress of king Benlli by fire from heaven at precisely the point at which St Garmon brought Christianity to the region, and by implication when the church of Llanarmon was founded, tells us something about the part which the landscape played in discourses of power in the early Middle Ages and about people's understanding, or perhaps lack of understanding, of processual change. The survival and flourishing of Llanarmon as the central place in Il whilst the ancient hillfort became overgrown with heather and gorse is reminiscent of a stanza penned by Óengus mac Óengobann, an Irish contemporary of the author of the Historia Brittonum, in the introduction to his Martyrology:

The strong fortress of Tara has perished
With the death of her princes.
With its quires of sages,
Great Armagh lives on.
(Stokes 1984 [1905]: 24)

In both cases the survival and flourishing of the leading ecclesiastical settlement of the region, Llanarmon for Il and Armagh for Ireland, is contrasted with the transient nature of royal association with abandoned prehistoric sites. With regard to the Irish material, Atchison (1994) has gone so far as to claim that the identification of impressive Iron Age monuments with national and provincial centres of kingship may have been entirely the product of an ecclesiastically driven discourse of this sort. Where Historia Brittonum diverges from the Irish examples is in the ascription of the destruction of the pagan arc of Benlli by direct divine intervention. It is not merely that worldly power is by its nature transient but that God will destroy it. This element of the narrative reflects the very real discourse of authority between the Church and secular rulers that characterised much of the early Middle Ages, reaching its climax in the Investiture Controversy of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

On a more mundane level, however, such narratives became available to these discourses precisely because early medieval people lacked a sense of historical process beyond the level of dynastic conflict. Behind modern ideas of periodisation utilised and explored by historians and archaeologists there usually lie concepts of cultural, technological and economic disjunctures. At its simplest this can be seen as the three-
age model for prehistory but also in the modern preoccupation with concepts like urbanisation, monetarisation and manorialisation. The unchanging past imagined by medieval writers can be seen throughout texts like Historia Brittonum which, for example, describes the period of Roman dominion over Britain (chapters 19-28) as a series of expeditions led by the rulers of Rome to impose temporary submission and tribute. Presumably the model for this was the kind of regional hegemony exercised by contemporary rulers such as the kings of Mercia or Tara who frequently humbled neighbouring kings but rarely annexed their kingdoms.

The nature of elite residence in ninth-century Wales is at present poorly understood. Between the fifth and seventh centuries royal residences do seem to have favoured fortified hilltop sites, though few, if any, were as impressive as Iron Age sites like Moel Fenlli (Arnold 2000). On the basis of archaeological evidence the only certain elite residence from the ninth century is the crannog, or artificial island, in Llangorse Lake, near Brecon, but it is far from clear that this site is representative (Campbell and Lane 1989). This said, under the year 811 the A- and C-texts of Annales Cambriae record the burning of Degannwy, following a lightning strike, and the A-text, the older of the two, describes Degannwy as an arx, the same word used for Benlli’s fortress in Historia Brittonum (Dumville 2002). The arx of Degannwy seems likely to have been on the same site as the later medieval castle, a rocky outcrop overlooking the mouth of the Conway. In this annalistic reference we seem to have an account of a hilltop citadel actually being destroyed by fire from heaven at about the time that Historia Brittonum was being composed. This episode may have been the inspiration for the story of Benlli but, in any event, it tells us that hilltop strongholds which could be severely damaged by fire were a part of the real world of ninth-century Wales and not just of the imagined past. Unlike the arx of Benlli, Degannwy must have been rebuilt since it was destroyed 11 years later by the Mercians (Dumville 2002). The story of Degannwy in this period confirms the hypothesis that the author of Historia Brittonum was imagining the past as the present and that he required specific events to explain the abandonment of prehistoric sites rather than having recourse to processual explanations.

That the trope of divine destruction of hillforts in this way was not an original contribution by the author of Historia Brittonum is confirmed by the account of the death of Vortigern which he gives in chapter 47:

Truly Saint Germanus used to preach to Vortigern that he should convert to the Lord and that he should cease his unlawful union with his own daughter; wretchedly he fled to Gwrtheynnion, the region which bears his name, where he might remain hidden with his wives. And Saint Germanus went after him with all the clergy of the Britons, and he prayed on a crag, and remained there for forty days and forty nights, and day and night he used to stand there. And a second time Vortigern shamefully fled, as far as the arx of Vortigern, which is in the land of Dyfed, by the River Teifi.
MONUMENTS IN THE LANDSCAPE

And in his accustomed manner St Germanus went after him, and there with all the clergy, fasted for his cause for three days and as many nights; and on the fourth night, at about the hour of midnight, fire sent from the heavens fell suddenly, the heavenly fire burning the whole fortress; and Vortigern with all his household, and with all his wives, was killed. This is the end of Vortigern as I found it in the Book of the Blessed Germanus; others, however, told it differently. (My translation)

The final sentence here makes it clear that at least some of the material relating to Germanus came from a pre-existing written source. It would be interesting to know whether both fire-from-heaven stories came from this source. It would be atypical for early medieval hagiography to have two such similar accounts and they look very much like too versions of the same story connected to a different local dynasty in each case. The axe of Vortigern in this story is usually thought to be Craig Gworheyn, near Llandysul, a small hill fort standing about 100m above the Teifi. There has been no serious modern archaeological investigation here (Gardner 1992). Geoffrey of Monmouth also tells of Vortigern’s death by burning in a hillfort, this time Little Doward by Ganarew, on the Wye. It cannot be coincidence that this site is only five kilometres from Monmouth but whether Geoffrey deliberately relocated the story to his homeland or whether, having grown up there, he knew a local version of the story cannot be determined. It should also be noted that, in line with his general rationalising of the supernatural, Geoffrey had the fire started by human agency (Thorpe 1966).

The episode at Degannwy in 811 demonstrates fire from the heavens could and did destroy royal citadels in early medieval Wales. What the author of Historia Brittonum and before him the author of the Book of the Blessed Germanus show us is that such events were interpreted as acts of divine justice visited upon immoral rulers. Locating such events at prehistoric hillforts first indicates that not only were all the products of medieval scriptoria regarded as in some sense edifying but that those who read the landscape also found a moral in their texts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Gardner, W., 1932 Craig Gwrtheyrn Hill Fort, Llanfihangel ar Arth, Carmarthenshire. Archeologia Cambrensis 87, 144-50.


