

Historical Record of the Battle of Mount Badon

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Gildas – *De Excidio et Conquestu Britannie*, 544

Gildas is the earliest author to mention the Battle of Mount Badon, but notably neglects to mention Arthur at all, a fact that has sparked much debate amongst scholars. This passage is the extent of Gildas' discussion on Badon and although it is hardly representative of the prominence Badon achieves later in the tradition, Gildas does sketch out the basic framework from which virtually all other renditions of Badon are derived. While Gildas was probably the first to write about Badon, he can hardly be considered the source of the Badon tradition, as the military aspects which he wholly neglects achieve great prominence quite quickly. There is an aspect to Gildas' writing that is extremely familiar – Gildas has already begun looking back at the age of Arthur (or rather, Ambrosius Aurelianus) with a great deal of nostalgia. Although Ambrosius seems to be only two generations dead, writers like Gildas are already lamenting the splendor of a past era.

Gildas. "De Excidio et Conquestu Britannie." *Arthurian Period Sources Vol. 7*. Ed. and trans. John Morris. Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 1978, pp. 27-28.

EXCERPT:

25 So a number of the wretched survivors were caught in the mountains and butchered wholesale. Others, their spirit broken by hunger, went to surrender to the enemy; they were fated to be slaves for ever, if indeed they were not killed straight away, the highest boon. Others made for lands beyond the sea; beneath the swelling sails they loudly wailed, singing a psalm that took the place of a shanty: 'You have given us like sheep for eating and scattered us among the heathen'. Others held out, though not without fear, in their own land, trusting their lives with constant foreboding to the high hills, steep, menacing and fortified, to the densest forests, and to the cliffs of the sea coast.

After a time, when the cruel plunderers had gone home, God gave strength to the survivors. Wretched people fled to them from all directions, as eagerly as bees to the beehive when a storm threatens, and begged whole-heartedly, 'burdening heaven with unnumbered prayers', that they should not be altogether destroyed. Their leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it. His descendants in our day have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence. Under him our people regained their strength, and challenged the victors to battle. The Lord assented, and the battle went their way.

26 From then on victory went now to our countrymen, now to their enemies: so that in this people the Lord could make trial (as he tends to) of his latter-day Israel to see whether it loves him or not. This lasted right up till the year of the siege of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed.

Bede – *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 731

Bede, like Gildas, was a clergyman, and wrote his treatise as moral excoriations of contemporary society, no doubt using a popular story to gain audience for their views. Bede's rendition has little of the glamour and legendary quality that Badon will take on in the centuries to come, which is also very much like Gildas. Bede is clearly more concerned with the presence and prescience of God in the lives of the Britons than the glorification of battle, or even the Britons themselves

The Venerable Bede. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 54-55.

EXCERPT:

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When the army of the enemy had exterminated or scattered the native peoples, they returned home and the Britons slowly began to recover strength and courage. They emerged from their hiding-places and with one accord they prayed for the help of God that they might not be completely annihilated. Their leader at that time was a certain Ambrosius Aurelianus, a discreet man, who was, as it happened, the sole member of the Roman race who had survived this storm in which his parents, who bore a royal and famous name, had perished. Under his leadership the Britons regained their strength, challenged their victors to battle, and, with God's help, won the day. From that time on, first the Britons won and then the enemy were victorious until the year of the siege of Mount Badon, when the Britons slaughtered no small number of their foes about forty-four years after their arrival in Britain.

Nennius – *Historia Britonum*, circa 796

Although the passage is short by comparison to many of the later renditions of the battle of Badon, Nennius is clearly one of the fathers of the literary tradition. The elements in Nennius' story are utilized through the ages, leaving scholars with no choice but to describe Nennius as the original source. Sources aside, Nennius introduces several major new aspects that are not found in either of his predecessors. Probably most important is that he is the first chronicler to associate Arthur with Badon, and he presents a considerable wealth of information about Arthur's war against the Saxons that has never been seen before.

Nennius represents more than a simple change in the events being described, however. While Bede's focus was on the importance of God himself in the event, Nennius' focus is on a person. The emphasis remains religious by focusing on Arthur's piety, carrying the image of the Virgin on his shield, but the focus has clearly shifted away from religious treatise and towards narrative. Rarely after Nennius is the story of Arthur told with deference to God; after Nennius, we are to admire the human side of the Saxon expulsion.

Nennius. *British History and the Welsh Annals; History from the Sources: Arthurian Period Sources Vol. 8*. Ed. and trans. John Morris. Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 1980, p. 35.

EXCERPT:

56 At that time the English increased their numbers and grew in Britain. On Hengest's death, his son Octha came down from the north of Britain to the kingdom of the Kentishmen, and from him are sprung the kings of the Kentishmen. Then Arthur fought against them in those days, together with the kings of the British; but he was their leader in battle.

The first battle was at the mouth of the river called Glein. The second, the third, the fourth, and the fifth were on another river, called the Douglas, which is in the country of Lindsey. The sixth battle was on the river called Bassas. The seventh battle was in Celyddon Forest, that is, the Battle of Clyddon Coed. The eighth battle was in Guinnion fort, and in it Arthur carried the image of the holy Mary, the everlasting Virgin, on his shield and the heathen were put to flight on that day, and there was a great slaughter upon them, through the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the holy Virgin Mary, his mother. The ninth battle was fought in the city of the Legion. The tenth battle was fought on the bank of the river called Tryfrwyd. The eleventh battle was on the hill called Agned. The twelfth battle was on Badon Hill and in it nine hundred and sixty men fell in one day, from a single charge of Arthur's, and no one laid them low save he alone; and he was victorious in all his campaigns. (Page 35)

William of Malmesbury – *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1125

William of Malmesbury, writing six hundred years after the actual battle, clearly states that he aims to dispel some of the myths surrounding Arthur and get back to who Arthur "really was." To a modern audience this might seem strange, because William proceeds to give just as fantastic a description as what we have read in previous sources. What can be gleaned from this statement is that William was harkening back to the very same sources that appear above. For him to include such a bold statement against the popular legend of Arthur indicates that there must have been a strong tradition in addition to the literary one that he recreates. Whatever account he read, he trusted it implicitly, replicating both the tone and the information that appeared in Nennius.

William of Malmesbury. *Gesta Regum Anglorum* V.1. Ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom Oxford: Oxford Medieval Texts, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 27.

EXCERPT

8.2 With his decease the Britons' strength withered away, and their hopes dwindled and ebbed; at this point, in fact, they would have collapsed completely, had not Vortigern's successor Ambrosius, the sole surviving Roman, kept down the barbarian menace with the outstanding aid of the warlike Arthur. This Arthur is the hero of many wild tales among the Britons even in our own day, but assuredly deserves to be the subject of reliable history rather than of false and dreaming fable; for he was long the mainstay of his falling country, rousing to battle the broken spirit of his countrymen, and at length at the siege of Mount Badon, relying on the image of our Lord's Mother which he had fastened upon his arms, he attacked nine hundred of the enemy single-handed, and routed them with incredible slaughter. On the other side, the English, through the sport of Fortune's wheel, made good their wavering ranks by reinforcements of their fellow-countrymen, and more boldly rushed into the fray; so, little by little, as the natives retreated, they spread over the whole island, not without the favouring providence of God, in whose hand is every change of lordship.