

Book Review: The Dates for Gildas and Badon in *Cambro-Latin Compositions: Their Competence and Craftsmanship* by David Howlett

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In this book, David Howlett claims to discover secret meanings in early Mediaeval Welsh compositions in Latin, including the dates for the battle of Badon and Gildas' composition of the *de Excidio Britanniae*. I argue that these dates are baseless.

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Unlike David Howlett, I am no expert on Cambro-Latin Compositions. However, I believe I am qualified to recognize lack of rigour in the analysis of data, and it seems to me that this phenomenon is evident in Howlett's *Cambro-Latin Compositions: Their Competence and Craftsmanship* [1]. In this book, Howlett claims to find all sorts of hidden depths in early Mediaeval Latin literature from Wales. The 'discovery' which is perhaps the most startling concerns the battle of Badon, which was believed to be the site of Arthur's ultimate defeat of the Saxons. Howlett concludes that the date for Badon, and for Gildas' composition of the *de Excidio Britanniae* (*DEB*), which is the oldest text to mention it, are concealed within the text of Latin works by Welsh scholars, including the *DEB* itself. Since this claim is probably also the one of most interest to readers of this journal, I will restrict my review largely to a critique of this part of Howlett's wide-ranging book.

Howlett's claim is that the Cambro-Latin tradition fixes the date of the battle of Badon, to be A.D. 496, and the date of Gildas' composition of the *DEB* to be A.D. 540. He bases this upon three works. The first is the *DEB* itself, the second is the early ninth century *Historia Brittonum* (which is the first to associate Arthur with Badon), and the third is the late 12th century *Descriptio Kambriae* by Gerald of Wales. Let us look at each work in turn.

The *DEB* is infamous for its obscure fixing of the year of the battle of Badon to the year of Gildas' birth, and perhaps to forty-four years before the date of composition, or perhaps to forty-four years after Ambrosius Aurelianus' first victory over the Saxons [2]. In his analysis of the *DEB*, Howlett finds the infamous forty-four also hidden in the text at this point, as the number of words between "From that time" [Ambrosius' victory] and "which is also that of my birth" (non-inclusively) [3]. Whether this discovery is convincing or not, it unfortunately adds absolutely no information to what Gildas says in the text.

At this point in his book, Howlett introduces the "traditional date reckoned for the composition of the *de Excidio Britanniae*, 540". No reference for this "traditional date" is given, and it certainly is not a universally accepted date for the composition. Recent historians have in fact varied widely in their estimation for the date of composition, from 479x484 [4] to up to c.545 [5]. Howlett finds nothing in Gildas to support this traditional

date, so Howlett's claim that Gildas dates the battle of Badon to 496 (forty four years before the time of his writing) cannot be supported from within the *DEB*. Also, the location of the forty-four words that Howlett discovers in Gildas' text would seem to suggest that the forty-four years were *before* Gildas' birth, not after it, which further undermines his calculation.

Next, Howlett considers the *Historia Brittonum*. Here he claims to find the year 496 in the passage on Arthur, as the number of *letters* from the beginning of "The twelfth battle was on the mountain of Badon ..." and the final "Amen". Obviously one could count other things instead, such as letters from the beginning of the section to the first mention of Badon, and one would obtain an entirely different date (but not one compatible with Gildas, perhaps). But the most obvious artifice in Howlett's computation is that he includes inter-word spaces in his letter count, including the space before "The twelfth" (*Duodecimus*) and the one after the final "Amen"! Howlett does not include spaces in his letter counts in other works, or even for discovering other hidden depths in the *Historia Brittonum*. But no justification is offered for doing so in this case. Also, the final Amen itself is not even present in the oldest extant manuscripts, as Howlett himself admits. Obviously he has made arbitrary choices in order to get the answer he wants, namely 496.

The final Cambro-Latin text Howlett uses to support his dating scheme is the *Descriptio Kambriae* by Gerald of Wales. Here Howlett pulls the year 540 out as the number of words in the preface up to and including "Gildas", in the sentence "And so Gerald follows Gildas". But Gildas' name also appears earlier in the preface, in the phrase "Before all other writers of Britain Gildas alone to me ... seems to be imitable." This first appearance of Gildas is as the 482nd word. As noted above, a date of around 482 has in fact been suggested by Higham [3] for the composition of the *DEB*. Alternatively, why should Gerald have been referring to the date of the composition of the *DEB*, rather than the date of Gildas' birth, for example. In that case, perhaps Badon was in 482. Or perhaps it was in 540. Or, more likely, we can draw no useful conclusions about 5th and 6th century history from the *Descriptio Kambriae* at all.

To summarize, the dates that Howlett has extracted from the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Descriptio Kambriae* would seem to tell us about his preconceptions of history in the Brittonic age rather than any fact about it. While I cannot judge whether all of Howlett's "remarkable coincidences" are similarly illusory, it is worth remembering that a one-in-a-thousand coincidence is likely to turn up if one has a thousand methods for counting. When one allows, as does Howlett in various places, counting letter or letters and spaces or syllables or words or lines or sentences, from the beginning or from the end of a passage, inclusive or non-inclusive, to the first occurrence or to a later occurrence, the number of possible integers that can be extracted from a text is very large indeed. A truly convincing study would have to prove statistical significance of the supposed patterns, obviously a much more demanding task than merely finding them.

Finally, Howlett's 'discoveries' can be criticized on historiographical as well as statistical grounds. His claims would only make sense if there were a continuous tradition of Welsh scholarship, with secret knowledge of Welsh history and secret Cambro-Latin compositional conventions stretching unbroken from the 6th to at least the 12th century, and then disappearing without trace. But this idea is belied by one of the cornerstones of early Mediaeval Welsh history and literature, the *Annales Cambriae*. These were composed in the middle of Howlett's period of study, probably in the 9th or 10th century [6]. As is well known, they give a date for Badon of around 518, quite incompatible with Howlett's date of 496. I have suggested how the *Annales Cambriae* date was derived in another publication [7].

To conclude this piece I would simply reiterate my final claim there, that we can only guess at the true date of the battle of Badon, and hope not to be wrong by too many generations [8].

[1] D.R. Howlett, *Cambro-Latin compositions: their competence and craftsmanship* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).

[2] For a review of arguments to the mid-1970s, see chapter VII of T.D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas: its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

[3] Here and below, all English translations of works discussed by Howlett are taken from Howlett's book.

[4] N. Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the fifth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.137.

[5] D.N. Dumville, 'The chronology of De Excidio, book I', *Gildas: New Approaches* (Boydell: Suffolk, 1984), 61-84.

[6] D.N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: history and legend', *History*, N.S., 62 (London, 1977), 345-354.

[7] H. Wiseman, 'The derivation of the date of the Badon entry in the *Annales Cambriae* from Bede and Gildas', *Parergon*, 17 (2000), 1-10.

[8] At least one recent historian must be wrong by more than a generation regarding the date of the battle of Badon. N. Higham, *ibid.* dates it to 436x41. This is about eighty years prior to the date of 519 suggested by V.I. Evison, *The Fifth-Century Invasions South of the Thames* (London: Athlone Press, 1965), pp.18-21.