

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

The derivation of the date of the Badon entry in the *Annales Cambriae* from Bede and Gildas*

Howard Wiseman

1. Introduction

The earliest record of Arthur that places him in a precise (to within a year or two) chronological context is that found in the *Annales Cambriae* (AC), the annals of Wales. The first year of these annals corresponds to A.D. 447¹, and, in the oldest extant versions, the last entries are for the 950s². Thus the annals were almost certainly compiled as a single document at least as early as the mid tenth century. Two entries mention Arthur. This article is concerned with the first, which records his victory at the battle of Badon. It is entered under year 72, which corresponds to A.D. 518, and reads:

* I would like to acknowledge correspondence with Thomas Green of Exeter College, Oxford, and the use of the library of the University of Queensland.

¹ The exact starting date of the annals is a matter of some disagreement. In this work I am following the school that says year 1 of the annals is A.D. 447. See for example L. Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (London: Penguin, 1971), pp.39,49. Another school favours a starting date of A.D. 445. See for example J. Morris (editor and translator), *British History and the Welsh Annals*, (London: Phillimore, 1980). This difference of two years has no substantial impact on any of the arguments I will present, so I have not burdened the reader with repeated caveats regarding the conversion of AC years to Anno Domini years.

² J. Morris, *British History and the Welsh Annals*

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The battle of Badon [*Bellum Badonis*], in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were victorious.³

Although earlier documents mention the victory of Badon, the *AC* are the first to give these details, and the first to give it a precise date.

This article is devoted to the obvious question: how was the date of this entry derived? In answering this question, a crucial issue is when the entries were first written. The currently accepted position is that argued by Dumville⁴, drawing on the work of Hughes⁵, that the Arthurian entries were made in the late eighth century at the earliest, the mid tenth century at the latest. A late date of composition is supported by the fact that the year of another entry from the first half of the sixth century, the death of Maelgwn, must have been calculated after 911, according to Dumville (*ibid.*).

Adopting this accepted position, the question under consideration can be refined as follows. How would a Welsh scholar, probably of the tenth century (but maybe of the ninth or late eighth), have determined the date for the Badon entry? In this article I will argue that it was calculated using the eighth century historical works of Bede and the (probably) sixth century writings of the British cleric, Gildas.

Before turning to Gildas and Bede, it is worth pointing out that there are no other sources for the 518 date extant. There are a few fleeting poetic references to Arthur that may predate the *AC*, but they shed no light on his perceived historical context⁶. This leaves only the *Historia Brittonum*, dated to c.829⁷. It contains a comparative wealth of Arthurian material including a reference to the 'battle of Badon Hill' (*bellum in monte Badonis*).

³ This quotation of, and subsequent references to, the *AC* use the version in J. Morris, *ibid.*

⁴ D.N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: history and legend', *History, N.S.*, 62 (London, 1977), 345-354 (p.176).

⁵ K.W. Hughes, 'The *Annales Cambriae* and Related Texts', *Proc. British Academy*, 59 (1973), 233-58.

⁶ P. Sims-Williams, 'The Early Welsh Poems', *The Arthur of the Welsh*, edited by R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and B.F. Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1991), 33-72.

⁷ D.N. Dumville, 'Some aspects of the chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 25 (Cardiff, 1972-74), 439-445 (pp.439-440).

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However, the chronology in the *Historia Brittonum* is sufficient barely to secure Arthur's supposed *floruit* to within a century⁸.

2. Gildas: forty-four years before Badon or after Badon?

The earliest reference to Badon is in the almost contemporary letter written under the name of Gildas. It assigns great significance to the 'siege of Badon Hill' (*obsessio montis Badonicus*) as the 'final victory of our Country which has been granted to our time by the will of God.'⁹ It is certain that Gildas' polemic, known as *De Excidio Britanniae (DEB)*, 'On the Ruin of Britain', was well read in the early Middle Ages¹⁰. There is every reason to believe that a compiler of the *AC* would have had a copy before him.

Gildas gives no dates and very few exact time-spans in his summary of the history of Britain. On the positive side, one of them is in conjunction with the siege of Badon Hill. Unfortunately Gildas' style is so convoluted that the meaning of the text (Sec.26) is unclear:

Ex eo tempore nunc cives, nunc hostes, vincebant ... usque ad annum obsessionis Badonici montis, novissimaeque ferme de furciferis non minimae stragis, quique quadragesimus quartus (ut novi) orditur annus mense iam uno emenso, qui et meae nativitatis est.

A fairly literal translation¹¹ of this seems to be

From that time on now the citizens, now the enemy, were victorious ... right up until the year of the siege of Badon Hill, almost the last, not the least, slaughter

⁸ Arthur's twelve battles as *dux Bellorum* are inserted between the death of Hengest, Saxon king of Kent, and the rise of Ida, king of the Bernicians. From the earlier sections of the *Historia Brittonum* we can reasonably suppose that the first event was thought by the author to have occurred in the second half of the fifth century. A century before the *Historia Brittonum* was written, Bede had dated the beginning of Ida's reign as 547 (*Historia Ecclesiastica Gens Anglorum* Bk. 5, c. XXIV).

⁹ Sec.2 of the translation by M. Winterbottom, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and other documents* (London: Phillimore, 1978). Except where indicated, all subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition.

¹⁰ This is true even outside Wales: as will be discussed, Bede relied upon it heavily.

¹¹ Partly following Winterbottom *ibid.* and partly following T.D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas: its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), p.134.

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of the villains, and this the forty-fourth year begins (as I know) with one month already elapsed, which is also [that] of my birth.

To establish the *DEB* as a source for the *AC* date, it is crucial to understand how a compiler of the *AC* would have understood Gildas.

To begin, it seems obvious that Gildas is saying is that he was born in the same year as the siege of Badon Hill¹². What is not obvious is the meaning of the 'forty-fourth year'¹³. One influential school of thought¹⁴ holds that Gildas was saying that he was writing forty-three years and one month after Badon. I will call this the 'after Badon' interpretation. A somewhat less popular opinion¹⁵ is that Gildas was saying that the battle of Badon took place forty-three years and one month after some other event not named by him in this sentence. I will call this the 'before Badon' interpretation.

In this section I will establish that the 'before Badon' interpretation was the one likely to have been used by the *AC* compiler. The only independent evidence for how Gildas was interpreted in the early Middle Ages is in the works of Bede. Thus it is essential to examine how Bede understood the above passage from Gildas.

In the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gens Anglorum (HE)* Bede closely follows Gildas in describing the fluctuating fortunes of the Britons, and the battle of Badon:

From that time on, now the citizens, now the enemy were victorious right up until the year of the siege of mount Badon, when there was no small slaughter of the enemy about forty-four years after their arrival in Britain.¹⁶

Here Bede seems to be adopting the 'before Badon' interpretation, in taking Gildas to mean that Badon was in the forty-fourth year of English

¹² For a contrary view see I. Wood, 'The End of Roman Britain: Continental evidence and parallels' *Gildas: New Approaches* (Boydell: Suffolk, 1984), 1-25 (p.23).

¹³ For a review of arguments to the mid-1970s, see chapter VII of T.D. O'Sullivan, *ibid.*

¹⁴ including D.N. Dumville, 'The chronology of *De Excidio*, book I', *Gildas: New Approaches*, 61-84 (pp.76-77); and P. Sims-Williams, 'Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 6 (1983), 1-30 (pp.1,4).

¹⁵ held, for example by T.D. O'Sullivan, *ibid.* and I. Wood, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Bk.1, c. XVI, my translation following M. Winterbottom *ibid.*

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settlement in Britain¹⁷. Gildas' *DEB* says nothing to support Bede's use of the 'English advent' as marking the beginning of a new era. It may be that Bede's own chronological framework based around the English advent¹⁸ influenced his interpretation of Gildas. Alternatively, Bede's copy of the *DEB*, which antedates the earliest extant manuscript by three centuries¹⁹, may have read differently from later versions. Regardless of these speculations, it is clear that Bede interpreted Gildas' forty-fourth year as being the year of his birth (and Badon Hill), not the year of his writing.

Bede's reading of Gildas in the 'before Badon' way suggests that the Welsh annalists would have done likewise. There is further evidence for this, in that the *AC* would be glaringly inconsistent if the annalists had read Gildas the other ('after Badon') way. If Gildas was writing in the forty-fourth year after Badon, that would have been about A.D. 561 according to the *AC*. But Gildas uses a considerable portion of his letter chastising a certain tyrant Maglocunus, who is universally identified as Maelgwn, the renowned king of Gwynedd. His death is noted in the *AC* under A.D. 549. Thus to remain consistent, the annalists must have understood the forty-three or forty-four years to be counted backwards from Badon, not forward.

3. Gildas: what was forty-four years before Badon?

Although the compilers of the *AC* would have been familiar with Bede²⁰, and agreed with his 'before Badon' reading of Gildas, they appear not to have

¹⁷ T.D. O'Sullivan, *ibid.*, p.156 and I. Wood, *ibid* have argued that Bede actually interpreted Gildas as placing Badon in the forty-fourth year after Ambroisus' victory (see Section 3), but that he thought that this victory was close in time to the English arrival. However, Bede actually dated these two events some decades apart in his earlier work the *Chronica Majora* and also includes a long narrative in the *HE* between these events (see Section 4).

¹⁸ When Bede relates the first arrival of the English (Bk.1, c.XV) he places it during the seven year joint imperium of Marcian and Valentinian, which he dates as 449-456 (actually 450-457). Elsewhere, when he gives the passage of time from the English advent to other events, he implies a date of c.445 (Bk.1, c.XXIII), c.447 (Bk.2, c.XIV) or c.446 (Bk.5, c.XXIII).

¹⁹ M. Winterbottom, *ibid.*, p.12.

²⁰ He is described in the Welsh triads (number 49 from the Red book of Hergest) as being one of the three men who received the wisdom of Adam. Acceptance of Bede would have been likely only after 768, the year that the Welsh church was reconciled to the Catholic placement

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agreed with his interpretation of the era to which the forty-fourth year belongs. If they had followed Bede and used any of Bede's dates for the English advent they would have calculated a date for Badon in the fifth century, not the sixth. Therefore they must have understood Badon to have been in the forty-fourth year of some other era.

As a number of authors have realized²¹, this other era can be found in the *DEB* itself. Immediately preceding the 'Badon' sentence quoted in Section 2 is the following (Sec.25.2)

After a time, when the cruel plunderers [the Saxons] had gone home, God gave strength to the survivors. Wretched people fled to them from all directions 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.

Assuming the 'before Badon' interpretation, it becomes obvious what era Gildas meant. When he says (see above) 'From that time on', he clearly means from the first victorious battle under Ambrosius. Thus when he subsequently says 'the forty-fourth year' he must mean the forty-fourth year from that victory.

4. Bede: the *Chronica Majora* as the origin for the AC date.

Gildas does not date Ambrosius' victory, so he alone cannot explain the 518 date in the AC. The only other early text that mentions Ambrosius' victory is Bede. Although clearly drawing his text from Gildas', he goes beyond his source by bracketing it within definite dates. This is done not in the *HE*, but in

of Easter. As discussed, it is unlikely that the Arthurian entries in the AC were made before then.

²¹ See T.D. O'Sullivan, *ibid.* (pp. 141, 155).

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the less well-known *Chronica Majora* of c. 725²². Under the reign of Zeno (474-91)²³ he enters the following:

The Britons, under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus (a gentleman who, alone of the Romans, had survived the disaster of the Saxons in which his parents, who had worn the purple, had been killed) challenged the victors to battle and defeated them.

In the *Chronica Majora* we have finally arrived at a potential source for the *AC* date for Badon. Like the *HE*, it would presumably have been available to Welsh scholars from the late eighth century²⁴. Adding forty-three years to the regnal period of Zeno gives the bracket 517x34 for the battle of Badon. If Gildas wrote a learned letter before the recorded death of Maelgwn in 549, he cannot have been born as late as 534. Moreover, Gildas writes in the *DEB* (Sec.1.2) that

I had decided to speak of the dangers run ... by the lazy. And it was, I confess, with unmeasured grief at heart that I kept silent ... as the space of ten years or more passed by. Then, as now, my inexperience and my worthlessness restrained me from writing any warning, however modest.

To incorporate this extra decade or more of silence an early date for Badon would be necessary. On this basis, it is not difficult to see how the date of 518 was chosen from the bracket 517x34, a discrepancy of one year requiring no special pleading. This computation would make Gildas at most thirty-one at the time of writing the *DEB*, which is not contradicted by textual evidence in the *DEB* or elsewhere²⁵. Taking the birth of Gildas to be A.D. 518 also presents no difficulty with the recorded year of his death (572) in the *AC*. Finally, a period of up to seventy-four years from Ambrosius' victory to Gildas' present is entirely compatible with Gildas' criticism of Ambrosius' living grandchildren.

²² This work, along with the *HE*, is translated and edited by J. McClure and R. Collins in *Bede* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994).

²³ My translation following M. Winterbottom *ibid.*

²⁴ Although there is no record of its early circulation in England, let alone Wales, according to J. McClure and R. Collins *ibid.*, p.xxvii.

²⁵ T.D. O'Sullivan, *ibid.*, pp.146-155.

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5. Discussion

There are two potential counter-arguments to the case I have made. The first could be founded on the denial that Bede interpreted Gildas' forty-four years as being before Badon. This was the stand taken by Plummer²⁶. He claimed that the coincidence of the figure of forty-four years in Gildas and Bede is just that, a 'mere coincidence'. As Myres²⁷ argued, this is hard to believe. Everything Bede knew about Badon came directly from Gildas. It seems just too unlikely that, when writing about Badon, he would also use the figure of forty-four years, but with a completely different and independent meaning.

Recently Sims-Williams²⁸ has resurrected Plummer's argument by suggesting that Bede, drawing on Gildas, had estimated that the battle of Badon took place in about A.D. 500. With this nice round figure in mind, Bede (according to Sims-Williams) then calculated this to be 'about forty-four years after' the English advent in 456. This date for the English advent is the latest possible date in his bracket of 449x456.

There are a number of problems with Sims-Williams' argument. The first is that nowhere else in the *HE* does Bede use 456 as a date for the English advent; as noted in footnote 18, if anything he tends to favour a date prior to 449. Sims-Williams explains this by hypothesizing that in transcribing Gildas' history (Bk.1, cc.XIII-XVI), Bede must have had in mind a date for the English advent around 456, but revised this backwards by a decade after having written his account (Bk.I, cc.XVII-XXI) of St.Germanus' visits to Britain. However, there is no evidence that Bede ever favoured a date around 456. To the contrary, in the *Chronica Majora*, written about five years before the *HE*, he already dates the English advent, as in the later sections of the *HE* (Bk.2, c.XIV), to about 447²⁹.

Secondly, although it is true that Bede often dates events from the English advent approximately (*circiter*), nowhere else in the *HE* does he quote

²⁶ C. Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica II* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896.), p.31.

²⁷ R.G. Collingwood and J.N.L. Myres, *Roman Britain and The English settlements* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), n.1 on p.461.

²⁸ P. Sims-Williams, 'The settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 12 (1983), 1-41 (pp.20-21).

²⁹ Bede, *Chronica Majora*, under the reign of Heraclius (4591-).

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the number of intervening years in anything other than multiples of five. The forty-four years is an anomaly unless it was derived from Gildas.

Finally, Bede was usually a cautious historian, as Sims-Williams himself notes³⁰. Even modern historians, with the benefit of other (especially continental) material, have found it impossible to construct an absolute chronology from Gildas' narrative. It is therefore hard to see why Bede would think it worth attempting to date the battle of Badon to the nearest year (even if only approximately), unless he was influenced by Gildas' forty-four years. As discussed in Section 4, when Bede dated Ambrosius' victory (another event known only from the *DEB*) he showed his usual caution by bracketing it within a long imperial reign.

The second potential counter-argument to my suggestion that Bede and Gildas inspired the *AC* compilers' dating of Badon is an old claim, recently restated by Padel, that in the *DEB* (and presumably also in the *HE*), 'Mount Badon reads naturally as the victory which crowned the career of Ambrosius Aurelianus.'³¹ If this were true then it might make it unlikely for a Welsh chronicler to have used Gildas and Bede to date the battle while contradicting them by crediting the victory to Arthur.

To rebut this criticism it is necessary only to point the reader to the text of Gildas and Bede as quoted above to see that neither associate Ambrosius with this battle at all. They associate him with the victory that began the period of fluctuating conflict, but are simply silent as to the leader at Badon Hill. Furthermore, if we accept, following the *AC* chronicler, the 'before Badon' reading of Gildas, then it is rather unlikely that Ambrosius was still the British commander forty-three years after his initial victory. Finally, there is no particular reason to expect Gildas to have identified the victorious leader at Badon at all. In all of the history which follows the death of Magnus Maximus³², Gildas mentions as individuals only two persons from Britain, and names only one of them (Ambrosius)³³. There would thus have been no reason derivable from Bede or Gildas for a compiler of the *AC* not to allow Arthur the victory at Badon Hill.

³⁰ P. Sims-Williams, 'The settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*' (p.19).

³¹ O.J. Padel, 'The Nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), 1-31 (p.17).

³² That is, a period of perhaps a century and a half from 388.

³³ The other is the 'proud tyrant' identified by Bede as Vortigern.

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One could take the current inquiry one stage further by asking how Bede obtained his approximate date for Ambrosius' victory. Since Bede appears to rely only upon the *DEB* for these events, the only answer would seem to be by estimation based on Gildas' account. The *HE* has a long narrative between the English advent and Ambrosius' victory, and this could easily cover the required time span, say 450-74. Gildas indicates the passage of some considerable but indefinite amount of time twice in this part of his history (Secs.22.5 and 25.2).

To conclude, this study has suggested the likely derivation of the earliest recorded date for the battle of Badon, that in the *Annales Cambriae*, from the earlier works of Gildas and Bede. If this suggestion is correct then the *AC* can be ruled out as an independent source for the date of this battle. The use of older sources by the *AC* compilers says little, of course, for the veracity of the 518 date. As discussed, Bede probably used guesswork to establish his approximate date of Ambrosius' victory. The battle of Badon Hill was undoubtedly a real and significant event, whether the leader of the Britons was named Arthur or not. But unless startling new evidence³⁴ is uncovered, we can only guess at its true date, and hope not to be wrong by too many generations³⁵.

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³⁴ Note added in proof: Such evidence, dating Badon to A.D. 496, is claimed (Thomas Green, pers. comm.) to be given in D.R. Howlett, *Cambro-Latin compositions: their competence and craftsmanship* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998).

³⁵ At least one recent historian must be wrong by more than a generation regarding the date of the battle of Badon. N. Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the fifth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.137 dates it to 436x41. This is about eighty years prior to the date of 519 suggested (on a basis independent from the *AC*) by V.I. Evison, *The Fifth-Century Invasions South of the Thames* (London: Athlone Press, 1965), pp.18-21.