

Review: *History and Identity in Early
Medieval Wales* (Thomas)



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REVIEWS

History and Identity in Early Medieval Wales. Rebecca Thomas. Studies in Celtic History [XLIV]. D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2022. xii + 202 pp. £75. ISBN 9781843846277.

This relatively short but stimulating book is a study of national identity in Wales in the ninth and tenth centuries, as perceived in and shaped by three texts: the Latin *Historia Brittonum* of 829/830 (henceforth *HB*), the *Life of King Alfred* by Asser (c. 893), and the Welsh poem *Armes Prydein*, whose dating is less certain though it is assigned by most commentators to the tenth century. As such, the book's subject is rather narrower than its title might suggest. 'Identity' is national or ethnic identity: other kinds of identity, such as gender, social class or religious affiliation, are not so much in focus. Furthermore, the time frame amounts to a century or somewhat more, and only three sources are investigated. That said, the lack of comprehensiveness is amply compensated for by the insights afforded through the close study of these three texts. Thomas has given herself a sensible remit, and the result is a well-structured, very readable book that offers genuinely new perspectives.

The introduction sets the topic of early medieval identity in context, covering both the biblical framework of the *gens* or nation as a group descended from a single ancestor and the copious modern scholarship on ethnogenesis as a cultural process; the work of Walther Pohl is especially cited here. While a view of ethnicity as constructed and performative, rather than innate, is now widespread in academic historical writing, the early medieval Welsh have remained on the edges of the ethnogenesis debate, so Thomas is innovative in putting them in the centre.

It quickly emerges, however, that early medieval Welshness is not an easy concept to grasp. Welsh writers in Latin consistently describe themselves as *Brittones* – Britons – and seldom give a clear view of Wales as a defined and recognized territory. Their British inheritance brought a host of literary and intellectual problems. Britishness did not fit comfortably into the literary models, and the problems only became more intractable with time. There was a disjunct between the name and historical origin of the Britons, which implied a claim to the whole island of Britain, and the contemporary reality that the Welsh and other Brittonic-speaking peoples actually inhabited only small areas of it. The longer this situation endured, the less realistic such a claim might appear, and the greater would be the pressure to adopt an alternative historical myth. A second, related problem was the fragmentation of the Britons into regions that were far apart and faced different neighbours, and thus developed along different historical trajectories. For how long after the seventh century could Cumbrians, Welsh, Cornish and Bretons continue to use the same name for

themselves and to regard themselves as one people? A third difficulty was 'regal solidarity', or the lack of it. In most, though not all, early medieval historical writing, the concept of the *gens* is closely bound to having a single ruler or ruling dynasty, yet even within Wales there was no single king to provide a focus for historical narrative. Finally, history was understood as the unfolding of the will of God, and that did not allow much space for losers. A people who had lost their ancestral, eponymous territory must have been punished for a good reason, because they were deficient in faith, morality and adherence to Christian teaching. From Gildas onwards this was a perception with which British authors had to wrestle.

Thomas examines these issues (and others) in five chapters. The influence of Rees Davies's classic lectures on high and late medieval national identities is apparent here but Thomas changes his emphases to reflect her narrower focus on specifically historical writing. Thus, she does not cover law or custom, for example, the subjects of Davies's third lecture. Her Chapter 1, 'Names, territories and kingdoms', closely matches Davies's second lecture, but she gives 'Language' a whole chapter (Ch. 2) where Davies allotted it only half a lecture. And the other half of Davies's lecture, on historical mythology, is matched here by two whole chapters on origin legends. There is a final chapter that is not thematic, but focused entirely on 'Asser and the origins of Alfred's kingdom', and this provides a most interesting reading of the *Life of Alfred* through the lens of origin legends, showing how Asser treated Alfred's reign as a historical moment in which a new Christian kingdom was founded.

Chapter 1, on 'Names, territories, and kingdoms' addresses the geographical intricacies. Thomas shows how these texts waver between competing visions. Britishness was attached to a view of the whole island of Britain, yet the northernmost part of the island, the home of the Scots and Picts, was often occluded. Wales itself, as Thomas makes clear, is a very ambiguous concept in this period. 'Welsh' writers in Latin did not call themselves anything other than *Brittones*, but Asser reveals that the country itself now had a name too. The term used was *Britannia*, which made good sense as a name for a land inhabited by Britons, but its ambiguities are obvious. An interesting discussion of *Armes Prydein* focuses on similar difficulties attached to the vernacular name *Kymry*.

Chapter 2 deals with language. The importance of the languages that people spoke has been questioned by some commentators on medieval ethnicities, especially those working on 'core' Europe, the Romance- and Germanic-speaking areas, who have noted that differences of language are not very prominent in medieval accounts from those regions (and many people moved comfortably between Germanic and Romance anyway). Thomas is undoubtedly right to insist that the situation in Britain and Ireland was different, and that language was very important to ethnicity. This is not to say that early medieval people here were not multilingual like their Continental counterparts – many clearly were – but there was a closer tie between language groups and political units here, as well as some very eloquent elites who used the vernacular for literature and law (especially, but

not exclusively, in Gaelic-speaking regions). Thomas's discussion focuses on her writers' manipulation of languages other than the main one that they were using: Brittonic/Welsh and English names in Asser and *HB*, and English words in *Armes Prydein*. By definition, we would expect all such names to be linguistically marked in comparison with the matrix in which they are embedded, and they invite the question why they appear where they do. Asser's names are geographical and consist of Brittonic names for places in Wessex and Mercia. These have intrigued many people in the past: are they evidence for the survival of Brittonic speech in ninth-century England? Were the names genuinely in use or invented by Asser? If the former, where and how were they in use, and where did Asser get them from? Finally, why did Asser include them? To each of these questions, Thomas argues that the answers are not uniform and that each case needs to be assessed separately. This is a valuable discussion that acknowledges the likelihood that Asser has more than one motive, including 'demonstrating his scholarly credentials' (p. 74).

Two chapters follow devoted to 'origin legends'. The first deals with the Britons themselves and focuses on the rich material in *HB*. There is a useful discussion of the competing origin legends of the Britons and their sources, biblical and classical. Thomas argues that, 'At the heart of the origin legends of the Britons in *Historia Brittonum* is their relationship with the Romans' (p. 91). Thus, she sees the Trojan origin of the Britons as an implicit claim to equality with the Romans as much as with the Franks. This leads her to devote a considerable amount of space to a part of *HB* – the account of Roman Britain – that is not really part of the British origin legend but a long episode within the history of a people who were already established. In *HB*'s own terms, the Britons originated as a separate *gens* long before the Roman conquest. Nevertheless, the question of how Romans and Britons interacted is obviously relevant to 'history and identity' and fully deserves the extended treatment that it receives. Thomas surveys the sources of the Roman chapters in *HB*, making a strong case that the author consciously sought to elevate the role of the Britons in comparison with his sources (chiefly Gildas and Orosius). The Britons appear as powerful warriors who are subdued only with great difficulty and prove even harder to govern. Roman control is thus insubstantial: 'their visits to Britain are fleeting and their connection to the island superficial' (p. 116). Thomas's argument that the *HB* author reacted against Gildas's negative, moralizing view of the Roman-British relationship is convincing. Nevertheless, there is another reason that might account for why *HB* depicts the Romans as 'fleeting' and 'superficial' conquerors. By the ninth century, any memory of the vast bureaucratic edifice of the Roman empire must have faded, and it would have been hard, arguably impossible, for the author of *HB* to conceive of a political unit that could govern Britain from a distant Continental capital for several centuries. For the *HB* author, 'ruling' Britain meant turning up with an army, raiding and plundering till the local rulers had had enough, and then accepting tribute, and once the emperors had gone away again, the locals would continue to pay the tribute only as long as they felt sufficiently threatened. Those were the rules of politics

in the small-scale world of the ninth century Isles, and that is how the author of *HB* envisaged the Roman emperors operating. Thus, if the author did wish to stress the warlike resistance of the Britons, as Thomas suggests (and I am sure that she is right), the classical sources would have helped him along, for they would naturally have given him the impression that Roman emperors came only occasionally to Britain and then invariably to fight; by implication, the Britons must have thrown off Roman overlordship between these visits. That swathes of Britain remained peacefully integrated into a bureaucratic state during these centuries was unlikely to be a concept within the author's capacity to imagine.

Chapter 4, the second to deal with origin legends, moves to Welsh views of the origin of the presence of Pictish, Irish and English peoples in Britain. The title, 'legitimate and illegitimate migration', perhaps hints that ninth-century texts can have direct resonances in our own times, though this is left unspoken. The Britons, in the view of the *HB* author and the *Armes Prydein* poet, derived their legitimacy from being the first-comers to Britain. Thomas (p. 125) adopts the term 'primary acquisition' from Patrick Geary to describe the concept of a first and thereby legitimate seizure of territory, which confers unique rights on the new possessors. Interestingly, it seems that both of the medieval authors were unfazed by the subsequent arrival in Britain of Gaels and Picts: the seizure of the far north of the island does not seem to have been seen as an encroachment from a distant Welsh perspective and these migrations to Britain could be taken as compatible with Britons' dominance of the rest of the island. These peoples thus had their own moments of 'primary acquisition' on the legitimate side of the divide, though the Irish settlements in Wales were not accepted in the same manner, and the *HB* author gives an account of their destruction that restores the Britons to rightful ownership. All of this is in contrast to the English, whose arrival is treated as quite illegitimate in both *HB* and *Armes Prydein*. Although it is generally agreed that *HB*'s account of Hengest and Horsa drew on an origin legend of English, and probably Kentish, origin, Thomas focuses on *HB*'s consistent presentation of the English side as treacherous, pagan and undeserving, and argues that the story was as much relevant to British identity as to English: 'It is as important as the Trojan origin legend in constructing an identity for the Britons in these texts' (p. 139). Such a move was necessary because of the painful disjunct between the ethnic identity of the Britons and their much-reduced territory in one corner of their own island. The *HB* author emphasizes the moral superiority and military prowess of the Britons at every turn and contradicts Bede's statement that the Britons played no part in converting the English to Christianity. *Armes Prydein*, on the other hand, suppresses the burden of the Britons' failure through moral indignation against the enemy and by presenting a vision of a better future in which the 'primary acquisition' is revindicated and the usurpers are driven out.

The final chapter takes a different route from the previous ones. It discusses only one work, Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, and analyses it as a contemporary origin legend which takes elements of the genre and makes them serve the purpose of arguing that Alfred's kingdom was a quasi-new foundation that embraced all the Christians of (southern) Britain in opposition to the pagan

Scandinavian intruders. Reading Asser with an eye on older Welsh texts, especially *HB*, allows Thomas to argue that Asser deliberately repurposed topoi previously used to castigate the English; in effect, the anti-English rhetoric of *HB* was turned against the Vikings. Equally new, and perhaps revolutionary, was Asser's conception of Wales as a country – *Britannia* – next to the English country of *Saxonia*. Asser turned away from distant British origins and embraced the geographical reality of his own present; yet paradoxically, the Britain-centred viewpoint remained, but attached now to Alfred's kingdom of English and Welsh *Christiani*.

In conclusion, it might be felt that the problems of Welshness and Britishness were not solved by any of the authors whom Thomas discusses in this book. Indeed, one could argue that they remain to trouble Welsh commentators down to the present day. *HB* looks backwards towards a British past but does not offer much in the way of a vision of the future. *Armes Prydein* attempts to turn *HB*'s rhetoric into just such a vision, but the clash with the real political geography of the poet's own world is severe – and his vision failed. The same is not true of Asser, for views that are recognizably descendants of his position are still observable and widespread in Wales today. Yet his hope for a multi-national community in which Welsh rulers could find an honourable place under English overlordship was not destined to be realized in the long term either. Rebecca Thomas's book is an excellent discussion of all these ninth-century visions of Wales-in-Britain, and reading it has reminded me that they remain relevant even today.

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North American Gaels: Speech, Story, and Song in the Diaspora. Edited by Natasha Sumner and Aidan Doyle. McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal & Kingston, London and Chicago, 2020. 511 pp. \$55. ISBN 9780228003793.

About an hour's drive from where I sit is a community first established in North America in the eighteenth century and in which the language of the old country continues to be transmitted from generation to generation. The speech of the Amish, however, is probably the only variety of German likely to persist in the American diaspora. This endogamous religious community deliberately isolates itself from the wider society in order to preserve its cultural identity. All other European languages in the Americas, however, other than those of the original colonial powers, are disappearing through the integration of their speakers into the wider national societies. Scottish Gaelic is a good example. It has had a continuous presence in Nova Scotia for as long as the Amish in the US, but intergenerational transmission has now largely ceased, though its significance to local heritage and identity remains.

North American Gaels is a collection of scholarly papers on the diasporic linguistic communities that spoke Scottish Gaelic and Irish. It is dedicated to