

GWRTHEYRN (VORTIGERN)

Name: Gwrtheyrn

Child: Gwerthefyr

Child: Pascent ap Gwrtheyrn

Gender: Male

Area of activity: Royalty and Society; Politics, Government and Political Movements; Literature and Writing

Author: Ifor Williams

According to Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the Saxons came to Britain to assist the Britons against the Picts and the Scots, being invited to do so by the Britons and their king 'Uurtigern.' The Roman emperors at that time were Marcian and Valentinian; they began to govern, according to Bede, in A.D. 449. Not so, says Plummer (*Baedae Opera*, ii, 27), but in 450, and Marcian in 457. Bede wrote this in 731; he had seen the lachrymose book of the Briton **Gildas** which was written before 547, the year in which **Maelgwn Gwynedd** died. There it is related (§ 23) that such a blindness fell upon all the counsellors and upon their proud ruler that instead of a garrison to defend their country they brought complete destruction upon it - because, in order to drive out the tribes from the north, they received into the island, like wolves into a sheepfold, the fiercely wild and impious Saxons, a people hated by God and men. These hired troops turned upon him who had engaged them and laid waste his kingdom. The first part of the land into which they dug their frightful claws was the eastern extremity of the island and that 'at the request' of the unfortunate king. It would be better to read 'at the command' or 'at the behest of' - the Latin reads 'iubente' - because the reference is to the land given them by the king as a dwelling place.

Towards the year 796 **Nennius** wrote his *Historia Brittonum*, in part from foreign chronicles and in part from Welsh tradition. He calls the king 'Guorthigirinus,' and the leaders of the Saxons 'Hors' and 'Hengist,' adding that they had been exiled from Germany; he relates that the king received them in a kind manner and gave them the island which in their tongue is called 'Tanet.' Bede assigns this occurrence to the year 347 after the Passion of Christ - 'when Gratianus and Equitius were the rulers' (Mommsen, 171-2). This is much too early; as Stenton says (*Anglo-Saxon England*, 1), when S. Germanus visited Britain in 447 the Britons had not yet been conquered by the barbarians. He places the 'invitation' to the Saxons between 446 and 454 and that seems a possible date. It is consistent with the testimony of archaeology to the presence of English settlements in Britain some time before the end of the 5th century; it also agrees with the pedigrees given by **Nennius** himself (£ 49) - from 'Fermmail,' who was king of 'Buelt' and 'Guorthigirniaun' when he was writing, to 'Guorthigirn Guortheneu' son of 'Guitaul' son of 'Guitolin' son of 'Gloiu' he gives eleven names. Between 450 and 798 there are 348 years; share these among the eleven persons and each is given a generation of thirty-one and seven-elevenths years. That is not unreasonable.

Later, 'Guorthigirn' became 'Gwrtheyrn' and 'Guorthenau' became 'Gwrthenau,' i.e. 'very thin'; the 'Guorthigirniaun' of the 8th century developed, through various forms, into 'Gwertheyrn-iawn' or 'Gwrtheyrniawn,' and, by transposition, into 'Gwerthryniwn' (as in the Bruts). Its meaning can be seen if one compares pairs such as 'Edern' and 'Edeirniawn,' or the tribal families of Powys according to **Gynddelw** (*LL. H.*, 163-6), e.g. 'Yorueirthyawn' from 'Iorwerth' ('Iorferth'); 'Gweirnyawn' from 'Gwern'; 'Tygyryawn' from 'Tengyr,' 'Tyngyr'; 'Lleissyawn' from 'Lles.' A name ending in '-iawn' can therefore denote the descendants of the family of some chieftain or the district in which they dwell. For the position of Gwerthryniwn between the rivers Wye and Ieithon, see **Lloyd**, *A History of Wales*, 253-4. For an attempt to explain the name as an example of 'calumpnia iuste retorta' see Mommsen, 187, n. 2; from 'gwarth-a-yr-yn-iawn'! According to **Nennius** (§ 48), Pascent, the son of Gwrtheyrn, received, after the death of his father, two districts, viz. Buellt and Gwrtheyrniawn, by the gift of **Emrys** who was a (great) king 'amongst' all the kings of the Britons (or 'over them'; the texts vary).

The story of Gwrtheyrn as given in the *Historia* is a mixture of two tales that were told by the cyfarwyddiaid, i.e. professional storytellers; the one tale a product of the court, the other a product of the church. According to the former tale, Gwrtheyrn, in order that he might have Hengist's daughter to wife, gave the Saxons the land of Kent. When he saw how the Saxons were increasing in number, he became afraid, wandered, and sought a place in Eryri (Snowdonia) where he could build a fort that would be strong enough against them. This provides the occasion for the tale to include the story of the little boy without a father, who overcame the king's druids with his great wisdom in explaining the battle between the red dragon and the white dragon and who obtained the fort - **Emrys** - for himself. He was **Emrys Wledig**. Gwrtheyrn had perforce to build his fort elsewhere.

In the meantime, Gwerthefyr, son of Gwrtheyrn, was fighting with some success against the enemy. But he died fairly soon. The Saxons returned, and by the deceit called 'Brad y Cyllyll Hirion' ('The Treachery of the Long Knives'), they killed 300 of Gwrtheyrn's chieftains, and he was forced to give them Essex, Sussex, and Middlesex as a ransom for his own life. In consequence, hated by everybody, he died of a broken heart, like a wandering beggar. That is the story of the courts.

According to the ecclesiastical version of the tale as found in the 'vita' of S. Germanus, Gwrtheyrn was guilty of incest and of marrying his own daughter. He was cursed by the saint and hounded from place to place. A fire from heaven came and burnt him and his wives in Caer Wrtheyrn, Dyfed, near the river Teifi.

No light at all is thrown on the manner in which Gwrtheyrn became king of the Britons or on his relationship to the sons of **Cunedda** in Wales. As **Gildas** also extols the bravery of **Emrys**, one might conclude that what is now England was his battle-ground, and that what is now Wales was left to the sons of **Cunedda**. **Gildas**'s praise of **Emrys** shows that the latter was a Roman; his name, **Ambrosius Aurelianus**, was Latin, as was that of 'Artorius' (Arthur). Gwrtheyrn bears a Celtic name - but his father and grandfather bore Latin names. And so with **Cunedda**. All this shows the admixture of blood and tradition which characterized the men who became prominent in Wales after the departure of the Romans.

Author

Sir Ifor Williams, (1881 - 1965)

Sources

J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*(London 1911), 102, 254

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Charles Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica* (1969), i, 30

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Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: **Vortigern**

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