

NENNIUS (NEMNIUS, NEMNIUUS) (fl. c. A.D. 800), monk and antiquary

Name: Nennius

Gender: Male

Occupation: monk and antiquary

Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing

Author: William Hopkin Davies

Nennius is the traditional author of the early Latin compilation known as the 'Historia Brittonum,' which purports to give an account of British history from the time of Julius Caesar to towards the end of the 7th century A.D. In the preface he describes himself as a disciple of [Elvodugus](#), who died in A.D. 809, with the title of 'chief bishop in the land of Gwynedd.' We may infer that Nennius held the same more cosmopolitan views of Christian practice as his master; but apart from his own disclaimer to any literary or intellectual pretensions, to which his poor latinity and total lack of any critical acumen bear ample witness, virtually nothing further is known of him. It may be that he was a native of the eastern districts of South Wales, as the internal evidence of his work indicates. It is unlikely that the 'Liber Commonei' at Oxford (Bodl. Auct. F. 4. 32) was written by him personally, but a reference in it shows that his name and probably his work were known in A.D. 820. He is also mentioned by name in the 'Psalter of Cashel' by Cormac mac Cuilennain (A.D. 836 - 908). As for the work itself, the 'Historia Brittonum' in its fullest form comprises a preface and seventy-six sections or chapters, which can be grouped conveniently as follows (cf. the Mommsen-Lot text): (a) The Preface; (b) The Six Ages of the World, 1-6; (c) The History proper, § §7-56; (d) The Anglo-Saxon Genealogies, etc., § §57-65; (e) Computations and the twenty-eight Cities of Britain, § 66; (f) The Marvels of Britain, etc., § §67-76. With the exception of the preface all these sections are found together in only one 11th century MS., B.M. Harl. 3859, which also contains the text of the 'Annales Cambriae' and the Welsh Genealogies. In spite of much scholarly criticism the question of the original nature of the 'Historia Brittonum', and the extent of later accretions is still undecided. Broadly speaking, one school holds that most of the present material in the 'Historia Brittonum' was already extant in an earlier anonymous 'Volume of Britain,' which provided the basis for the Nennian and subsequent editions (compare the claims made for the 'Lebor Bretnach,' the 11th century Irish version of Nennius by Gilla Coemain); others find sound reasons for holding that the Preface, most of § §7-56, the section on the Cities of Britain, and some of the Marvels comprised the original work of Nennius himself, c. A.D. 796-800, and that later editors or copyists incorporated other material according to their own special interests. Nennius himself tells us that he has made use of the chronicles of Eusebius, Jerome, Isidore, and Prosper, the annals of the Romans, Irish, and Saxons, and native tradition, including a 'liber beati Germani.' His debt to the 'De Excidio Britanniae' of [Gildas](#) for events to c. A.D. 540 is obvious, but the question of his knowledge and use of Bede depends on the view taken of the composition of the 'Historia Brittonum.' Whatever his sources, the resulting compilation is a travesty of sober history, though certain sections, e.g. the genealogies, are of considerable historical importance. The real value of Nennius's work, however, is in the material which it affords for the study of the Arthurian Legend and early Celtic literature and learning in general.

An English translation was published by [A. W. Wade-Evans](#) (1938); also text and translation by John Morris, *Historia Brittonum and the Welsh Annals* (1980). Important discussions by David N. Dumville are found in his *Histories and Pseudo-Histories of the Insular Middle Ages* (1990) and contrast P. J. C. Field in *Studia Celtica*, 30 (1996), 159-65.

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Sources

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