



MEDIEVAL LIBRARY

Nennius

The History of the Britains



DELPHI
CLASSICS

The History of the Britains by

NENNIUS

(fl. 9th century)



Contents

The Translation

The History of the Britains (c. 830)

The Original Text

Contents of the Latin Text

The Dual Text

Dual Latin and English Text

The Biography

Nennius (1900) by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford

The Delphi Classics Catalogue



© Delphi Classics 2025
Version 1

Medieval Library

NENNIUS OF POWYS



By Delphi Classics, 2025

COPYRIGHT

The History of the Britains by Nennius



First published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by Delphi Classics.

© Delphi Classics, 2025.

Cover illustration: *The Knights of the Round Table about to Depart in Quest of the Holy Grail*
by William Dyce, 1849, Scottish National Gallery.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form other than that in which it is published.

ISBN: 978 1 80170 232 4

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

Contact: sales@delphiclassics.com

DELPHI  CLASSICS

www.delphiclassics.com

The Translation



Hand-drawn map of Radnorshire, Brecknockshire, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire by Christopher Saxton, 1578 —Nennius is believed to have lived in the area made up by Brecknockshire and Radnorshire in present-day Powys, Wales.

The History of the Britains (c. 830)



Translated by J. A. Giles, 1848

A Welsh monk of the ninth century, Nennius is traditionally ascribed as the author of the *Historia Brittonum*, due to the prologue affixed to that work. We know very little about his life. He was a student of Elvodugus, commonly identified with the Bishop Elfodd of Bangor (died 809), who convinced British ecclesiastics to accept the Continental dating for Easter. Nennius likely lived in the area made up of Brecknockshire and Radnorshire in present-day Powys. Therefore, he lived outside the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, isolated by mountains in a rural society. Due to the lack of evidence concerning his life, he has become the subject of legend. Welsh traditions include Nennius with Elbodug and others said to have escaped the massacre of Welsh monks by Ethelfrid in 613, when they fled to the north.

Historians have conservatively assigned 828 as the earliest possible date for the composition of *Historia Brittonum*, which is consistent with the statement in chapter 4 that “from the Passion of Christ 796 years have passed. But from his Incarnation are 831 years”. It was a highly influential text of the early medieval period, becoming a major contributor to the Arthurian legend, in particular for its inclusion of events relevant to debate about the historicity of King Arthur. It also concerns the legendary origins of the Picts, Scots, Saint Germanus and Vortigern, while documenting events associated with the Anglo-Saxon invasion of the seventh century, as contributed by a Northumbrian document.

Evidence suggests that the *Historia Brittonum* was formed from several sources, some of which are named by Nennius, while the origins of others are unstated. Some believe that the text was largely based on Gildas’ *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* written some three centuries before. Other possible sources are a *Life of St Germanus* and several royal pedigrees. The *Historia Brittonum* is a complex work, blending history and myth in a way that is difficult to separate. At its core, the text serves as an attempt to establish the genealogies of various Welsh and British rulers, tracing their lineage back to ancient times and legendary figures such as King Arthur. The work also provides detailed descriptions of the kingdoms and peoples of the British Isles, from the Picts in the north to the Saxons in the south, and includes accounts of notable events such as the arrival of the Saxons and the rise of King Arthur.

The *Historia Brittonum* contains stories of legend and superstition alike. The historical accuracy of the text is of course questionable, though it is internally consistent. Nennius makes several attempts to trace the history of the Britons back to the Romans and Celts through his empirical observations of what he refers to as “The Marvels” or “Wonders of Britain”. These include ruins, landmarks and other aspects of the British countryside that he deems worthy of documentation. His explanation of the physical landmarks and ruins take on a mystical interpretation, in spite of the author’s status as a Christian monk. There is a sense of nationalist pride, as Nennius attempts to legitimise the people of Britain and embellish the past through legend, much as the Romans used the story of Romulus and Remus to legitimise the founding of Rome. One such example of this is when Nennius stresses his accounts of Arthur and his twelve battles. The *Historia Brittonum* would influence Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136) — one of the early Welsh chronicles and romantic histories of King Arthur. Nennius, however, never refers to

Arthur as a King, instead calling him a “Dux Bellorum” (commander of war) that leads the kings of Britain into battle.

The text describes the supposed settlement of Britain by Trojan settlers and claims that Britain was named after Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas. This Trojan origin tradition was incorporated into many subsequent chronicles of the long-running history of the land, such as the Middle English *Brut of England*, also known as *The Chronicles of England*. The *Historia Brittonum* also contains a story of the king Vortigern, who allowed the Saxons to settle in the island of Britain in return for the hand of Hengist’s daughter. One legend about Vortigern claims he tried to build a stronghold near Snowdon called Dinas Emrys, only to have his building materials disappear every time he tried. His advisers told him to sprinkle the blood of a fatherless boy on the site to lift the curse. Vortigern found such a youth in Ambrosius, who rebuked the wise men and revealed that the disturbance was caused by two dragons buried underground.

Throughout the text, the author makes use of two narrative techniques that are generally considered unreliable by modern academic standards: synthesising and synchronising history. Synthetic history combines legendary elements with fact, which makes the veracity of the text challenging to evaluate. Various specious causal connections and attempts to synchronise material from different sources and traditions also contribute to undermining the reliability of the text. Although the accuracy of Nennius’ accounts is open to question, his work provides a valuable window into the way that the Britons saw themselves and their history. The blending of history and myth in the *Historia Brittonum* reflects the importance of legend and tradition in shaping the identity of early British peoples. Nennius’ undeniable talent as a storyteller ensures that the text remains an enduring and fascinating work of history and myth.

a' d'atu' fuerit illi de sup' & p'fecit ille pal
 ludi de hibernia. sequente ad brycanni-
 a' & ibi defunct' in terra picconi.
 et dicitur morte palli da' epi' ali' lega-
 c' patrici' ebeo docto & ualencio
 regnauit. ascelesiguo papa romano
 & anglo d'icui nom' erat uiccor monen-
 te & succente a' d' germano epi' ad-
 scofos in fide xpi' conuicent' d' m'it
 e' d' d' sic german' semore cu' illo se-
 g'ru' ad quenda' homine' mirabil' &
 sumu' episcopi' amathica reg' m'p'z
 p'p'quo' habicant'. Ibi se' d'ent' d' d'
 q' d' uent' e' d' illi episcopal' m' q' d'
 du' amathica reg' epi' se' d'cepit. &
 nom' quod' patrici' sumpit' qu' d'
 p' d' m' q' uocabat' d' d' d' & d' d'
 m' d' c' c' c' m' f' e' r' o' r' i' g' r' a' d' u' s' i' m' u' l' o' r'
 d' m' a' c' i' s' e' u' c' o' .
 u' n' c' a' c' c' e' p' t' i' s' b' e' n' e' d' i' c' t' i' o' n' i' b' u' s' p' f' e' c'
 t' i' s' q' u' o' n' i' b' u' s' i' n' n' o' m' i' n' e' s' e' t' e' r' m' i' t' a' t' u' s'
 p' a' t' r' i' c' i' s' a' s' c' e' n' d' i' t' n' a' u' i' & p' u' e' n' i' t' a' d'
 b' r' i' t' a' n' n' i' a' & p' d' i' c' a' u' i' t' i' b' i' n' i' m' a' l' e' t'
 d' i' c' i' s' & a' m' i' s' s' i' s' o' m' n' i' b' u' s' a' m' b' u' l' a' n' t' i' s' a' n' f' i' c' e'
 e' i' b' s' s' i' m' a' u' e' l' o' c' i' t' a' c' e' . f' l' a' c' u' s' q' u' i' p' e' r' o'
 m' a' r' e' h' i' b' e' r' n' i' c' u' e' u' n' a' u' i' d' e' s' c' e' n' d' i' t'
 h' o' n' e' r' i' c' u' s' u' e' r' o' n' a' u' i' s' e' u' e' u' i' s' s' i' m' i' s' a' r' m' i' s'
 m' i' r' a' b' i' l' i' b' u' s' & s' p' i' r' i' t' u' a' l' i' b' u' s' e' c' c' l' a' u' i' s' p' r' e' u' e' n'
 a' d' h' i' b' e' r' n' i' a' . & b' a' p' t' i' z' a' u' i' t' e' o' s'
 m' a' n' d' i' p' r' i' n' c' i' p' i' o' u' s' q' u' e' a' d' b' a' p' t' i' s'
 i' n' t' e' h' i' b' e' r' n' i' c' i' s' u' . q' u' i' n' q' u' i' m' i' l' i' a'
 e' x' c' e' n' t' i' s' t' r' i' g' i' n' t' a' a' n' n' i' s' u' n' t' . m' . d' . d' i'
 n' o' l' o' q' u' a' r' e' r' e' g' i' s' e' x' o' r' t' u' s' p' r' e' d' i' c' a' t' e'
 f' i' d' e' x' p' i' .
 e' s' i' t' a' q' u' e' p' a' t' r' i' c' i' e' u' a' n' g' e' l' i' u' x' p' i'
 e' x' e' n' t' i' s' n' a' c' i' o' n' i' b' u' s' p' a' n' n' o' s' q' u' a'
 d' i' g' n' i' t' a' p' d' i' c' a' b' a' t' . u' i' r' t' u' e' s' a' p' o' s'
 t' o' l' i' c' a' s' . c' e' c' o' s' i' l' l' u' m' i' n' a' b' a' t' . l' e' p' t' o' s'
 m' u' n' d' a' b' a' t' . s' u' r' d' o' s' a' u' d' i' r' e' f' a' c' i' e' b' a' t' .

The British Museum Manuscript of 'Historia Brittonum', Harleian 3859



Tapestry showing Arthur as one of the Nine Worthies, wearing a coat of arms often attributed to him, c. 1385

CONTENTS

I. THE PROLOGUE.

II. THE APOLOGY OF NENNIUS

III. THE HISTORY.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE KINGS OF BERNICIA.¹

THE GENEALOGY OF THE KINGS OF KENT.

THE ORIGIN OF THE KINGS OF EAST-ANGLIA.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE MERCIANS.

THE KINGS OF THE DEIRI.



Statue of Geoffrey of Monmouth at the Old Station Tintern, Monmouthshire — the 'Historia Brittonum' would come to be the basis on which later medieval authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth would write their chronicles.



Stonehenge, a prehistoric megalithic structure on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England— ‘Historia Brittonum’ details the construction of Stonehenge.



The translator John Allen Giles (1808-1884) was a clergyman and Head Master of the City of London School (1836-40).

I. THE PROLOGUE.



1. NENNIUS, THE lowly minister and servant of the servants of God, by the grace of God, disciple of St. Elbotus,¹ to all the followers of truth sendeth health.

¹ Or Elvod, bishop of Bangor, A.D. 755, who first adopted in the Cambrian church the new cycle for regulating Easter.

Be it known to your charity, that being dull in intellect and rude of speech, I have presumed to deliver these things in the Latin tongue, not trusting to my own learning, which is little or none at all, but partly from traditions of our ancestors, partly from writings and monuments of the ancient inhabitants of Britain, partly from the annals of the Romans, and the chronicles of the sacred fathers, Isidore, Hieronymus, Prosper, Eusebius, and from the histories of the Scots and Saxons, although our enemies, not following my own inclinations, but, to the best of my ability, obeying the commands of my seniors; I have lispily put together this history from various sources, and have endeavored, from shame, to deliver down to posterity the few remaining ears of corn about past transactions, that they might not be trodden under foot, seeing that an ample crop has been snatched away already by the hostile reapers of foreign nations. For many things have been in my way, and I, to this day, have hardly been able to understand, even superficially, as was necessary, the sayings of other men; much less was I able in my own strength, but like a barbarian, have I murdered and defiled the language of others. But I bore about with me an inward wound, and I was indignant, that the name of my own people, formerly famous and distinguished, should sink into oblivion, and like smoke be dissipated. But since, however, I had rather myself be the historian of the Britons than nobody, although so many are to be found who might much more satisfactorily discharge the labour thus imposed on me; I humbly entreat my readers, whose ears I may offend by the inelegance of my words, that they will fulfil the wish of my seniors, and grant me the easy task of listening with candour to my history. For zealous efforts very often fail: but bold enthusiasm, were it in its power, would not suffer me to fail. May, therefore, candour be shown where the inelegance of my words is insufficient, and may the truth of this history, which my rustic tongue has ventured, as a kind of plough, to trace out in furrows, lose none of its influence from that cause, in the ears of my hearers. For it is better to drink a wholesome draught of truth from the humble vessel, than poison mixed with honey from a golden goblet.

2. And do not be loath, diligent reader, to winnow my chaff, and lay up the wheat in the storehouse of your memory: for truth regards not who is the speaker, nor in what manner it is spoken, but that the thing be true; and she does not despise the jewel which she has rescued from the mud, but she adds it to her former treasures.

For I yield to those who are greater and more eloquent than myself, who, kindled with generous ardour, have endeavoured by Roman eloquence to smooth the jarring elements of their tongue, if they have left unshaken any pillar of history which I wished to see remain. This history therefore has been compiled from a wish to benefit my inferiors, not from envy of those who are superior to me, in the 858th year of our Lord's incarnation, and in the 24th year of Mervin, king of the Britons, and I hope that the prayers of my betters will be offered up for me in recompence of my labour.

But this is sufficient by way of preface. I shall obediently accomplish the rest to the utmost of my power.

II. THE APOLOGY OF NENNIUS



HERE BEGINS THE apology of Nennius, the historiographer of the Britons, of the race of the Britons.

3. I, Nennius, disciple of St. Elbotus, have endeavoured to write some extracts which the dulness of the British nation had cast away, because teachers had no knowledge, nor gave any information in their books about this island of Britain. But I have got together all that I could find as well from the annals of the Romans as from the chronicles of the sacred fathers, Hieronymus, Eusebius, Isidorus, Prosper, and from the annals of the Scots and Saxons, and from our ancient traditions. Many teachers and scribes have attempted to write this, but somehow or other have abandoned it from its difficulty, either on account of frequent deaths, or the often recurring calamities of war. I pray that every reader who shall read this book, may pardon me, for having attempted, like a chattering jay, or like some weak witness, to write these things, after they had failed. I yield to him who knows more of these things than I do.

DELPHI  CLASSICS

End of Sample