

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Nennius [Ninnius, Nemnius]

(fl. c. 770–c. 810)

David E. Thornton

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/19892>

Published in print: 23 September 2004

Published online: 23 September 2004

Nennius [Ninnius, Nemnius] (fl. c. 770–c. 810), scholar, is commonly, but most certainly incorrectly, regarded as the author of the early ninth-century Cambro-Latin historical compilation *Historia Brittonum*. The ascription to Nennius occurs in just one of the numerous recensions of the text, the so-called ‘Nennian recension’, which survives in five medieval manuscripts. The earliest and primary recension (the Harleian) offers no identity for the author, while most others attribute the text, equally erroneously, to Gildas. No original copy of the Nennian recension survives, but between 1164 and 1166, at the Cistercian abbey of Sawley, Yorkshire, three different scribes collated the same (now lost) copy of the recension with the Gildasian recension which is now in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, manuscript 139. The Nennian material was accordingly added to this manuscript as a series of interlinear and marginal annotations plus the prologue and this composite text is the archetype of all other copies of this recension. The Nennian recension seems to have been created in north Wales (possibly Anglesey) in the first half of the eleventh century, probably by a scribe called Euben (Owain) under the direction of his clerical *magister*, Beulan; and it was probably at this stage that the prologue attributing the *Historia* to Nennius was composed. This prologue describes him as (*Ninnius Eluodugi discipulus* (‘Ninnius disciple of Elfoddw’)). If Elfoddw is the bishop of Bangor of that name who in 768 was responsible for bringing the Welsh church into conformity in the Paschal question and who died in 809, and assuming the connection with Ninnius is reliable, then Nennius would have lived at some time between about 770 and 810. Furthermore, Nennius may be identified with the Nemnius said to have composed an alphabet based on Old English runic ‘futhorc’, but adapted to Old Welsh orthography, which is preserved in a manuscript written in 817. This would suggest that the historical Nennius was a Welsh scholar with linguistic interests and specifically with a familiarity with things English, perhaps explaining in part why the creators of the Nennian recension believed him to have been the author of the *Historia*.

The true author of the *Historia Brittonum* remains anonymous. From internal chronological calculations it can be determined that the work was composed in 829–30, perhaps in Gwynedd or more specifically at the court of Merfyn Frych (fl. 825–844). However, the author himself was possibly a cleric originally from the border

region of south-east Wales, possibly around the minor kingdoms of Buellt and Gwrtheyrnion. The contents of the text suggest that, as well as Old Welsh and Latin, the author knew Old English (like Nennius) and perhaps even some Old Irish. The statement in the erroneous 'Nennian prologue' that Nennius had simply 'made a heap' of all that he had found has long inclined scholars to take a dim view of the work and its author; but modern analysis demonstrates that it warrants closer attention. In fact, the *Historia Brittonum* represents the earliest extant example of continuous historical writing in Wales and is an instance of early medieval synchronizing history especially common in Ireland. It seeks to trace the history of the Britons (that is, the Welsh) as descendants of the legendary eponymous Trojan immigrant 'Britto' (or the Roman consul 'Brutus') down to the late seventh century. It lacks any absolute dates, but creates a relative chronological structure from Roman imperial lists and Anglo-Saxon regnal lists and genealogies, as well as standard Christian computistical calculations. Within this structure are synchronized a variety of legendary, hagiographic, aetiological, etymological, and literary materials in an effort to create something approaching a coherent narrative. Much of the information thus incorporated certainly cannot be taken at face value and there are instances of error and miscalculation by the author; but the final product is a commendable, if problematic, attempt at historical writing based on very limited sources.

Analysis of the sources used in the *Historia Brittonum* provides a brief glimpse into the cultural and scholarly milieu of the royal court of Merfyn Frych, for which there is other evidence. Native Welsh matter includes: a battle-catalogue poem of Arthur; a life of St Garmon of Powys (identified with Germanus of Auxerre); the legend of Ambrosius Aurelianus, or Emrys Wledig; plus local place-name legends. Much of this material is unique to the *Historia* and, despite its historical unreliability, is therefore a witness to Welsh literature and pseudo-historical writing in the early ninth century. The list of Arthur's battles, for example, demonstrates an early stage in the growth of the Arthurian legend. Similarly, the otherwise unknown life of Garmon, in describing the saint's dealings with Cadell Ddyrnllug and Vortigern, preserves important aetiological traditions about the kingdoms of Powys and Gwrtheyrnion. Materials of English significance include traditions about the Kentish settlers Hengist and Horsa and their dealings with Vortigern and various Anglo-Saxon regnal lists and genealogies, as well as Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. The author also appears to have had access to sources of originally Irish provenance, including some lives of St Patrick (or parts thereof) plus what was probably an earlier version of the synchronizing pseudo-history *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ('Book of the conquest of Ireland'); and these should perhaps be taken alongside other indications of cultural contacts between the court of Merfyn Frych and Ireland.

Thus, despite its obvious difficulties as a primary source and the erroneous attribution to Nennius, the *Historia Brittonum* is an important work, providing unique if problematic information about the sixth and seventh centuries as well as giving an insight into early ninth-century Wales. Indeed, its significance is reflected in the number of times it was copied and reworked throughout the middle

ages (including, as the *Lebor Bretnach*, or 'Book of the Britons', a translation into Middle Irish made in the eleventh century). The main copy of the Harleian recension has inserted into its text the *Annales Cambriae* and the Harleian genealogies, both important Welsh historical sources composed in Dyfed under Owain ap Hywel Dda. Finally it should be stressed that the *Historia Brittonum* constituted an important source and model for the *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (*d.* 1155).

Sources

T. Mommsen, ed., *Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII.*, 3, MGH Auctores Antiquissimi, 13 (Berlin, 1898)

Nennius, '*British history*' and '*The Welsh annals*', ed. and trans. J. Morris (1980)

R. Derolez, *Runica manuscripta: the English tradition* (1954), 157-9

D. N. Dumville, *Histories and pseudo-histories of the insular middle ages* (1990)