

1 Textual Connections

A key argument of this book is that it is impossible to separate the growth of any one of the insular origin narratives from that of the larger corpus of historical and pseudohistorical writing which contained them. This initial chapter therefore presents the evidence for the textual connections between these works in one place, while the chapters to follow will analyse the historical, literary, and cultural implications of these connections. A crucial part of this discussion will of course centre around known connections between texts in the corpus of insular historical and pseudo-historical works, and so this chapter outlines the sources and later reuses of each major work under consideration. This survey is, by necessity, in part a synthesis of the work of previous scholars. It is presented here because while studies of the individual texts discussed below are generally well-aware of their connections to other works in the insular corpus, broader scholarship on the early medieval period still treats so-called 'Irish', 'Welsh', 'Anglo-Saxon', and 'Scottish' literary and historical traditions as disparate. Yet as Robert W. Rix has noted, 'the understanding of the end product is enriched by making sense of the sources utilized to create its authority'.¹ In compiling scholarship on the transcultural nature of the works which contained insular origin material and explicating the layers of textual connection between them, this chapter follows the methodology of scholars such as Goffart, Plassmann, Coumert, and Reimitz in overturning the common perception that the authors of these texts were working in proto-national isolation and instead revealing the textual connections that shaped the intellectual landscape of the early medieval insular region.²

Compiling this information in one place, moreover, allows me to make the new connections and conclusions which form the bulk of this chapter's arguments. My focus is on three simple yet important points, whose

¹ Rix, *The Barbarian North*, 19.

² Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*; Plassmann, *Origo gentis*; Coumert, *Origines des peuples*; Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*.

impact has not yet been fully appreciated. The first is that three out of the four early insular origin legends are first recorded in a work whose author was writing outside that group itself. In other words, the Anglo-Saxon origin legend is first recorded by the British Gildas; the Pictish origin legend by the Anglo-Saxon Bede; and the Irish origin legend by the British author of the *Historia Brittonum*. The textual ghosts on which these authors drew shed invaluable light onto the web of intellectual connections within the corpus of works containing early insular origin material, as they reveal moments where a given text has got its information from a source that no longer survives.³ They also show us that early insular authors were not as interested in writing the histories of their 'own' people in a vacuum as much as they were with filling in gaps in the historical narrative from every available source.

My second simple point is the frequency with which moments of direct connection between texts in the corpus of early insular works containing origin material are acknowledged within these works themselves; that is, moments in which a text declares that it has got its information about a given episode from another source. When these moments are compiled, their cumulative weight and commonplace nature both demonstrate the intellectual connectivity of this corpus and underscore the extent to which its authors sought out all available information as they wrote. The third and final point that this chapter explores is that these texts draw no value distinctions between 'internal' and 'external' versions of a given people's origin story. In other words, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* does not prioritise 'the tradition of our elders' over 'the writings of the Irish and the English'.⁴ The narratives of early insular origin legends were not treated as codified by the texts that preserved them. Any information that added knowledge was welcomed, demonstrating the important role of the corpus of insular historical works as a whole in shaping the growth of these narratives. Together, these patterns of textual transmission underscore the interconnected nature of the corpus of works containing origin material in the early medieval insular region.

Before I turn to the texts themselves, it is important to clarify the terminology used throughout this book. My focus is the origin stories of the peoples who inhabited the islands of Britain and Ireland from roughly

³ This process functions in the same way that references to *deperdita* in surviving documentary sources nonetheless provide valuable information: see Warren Brown, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Adam Kosto, 'Introduction', in Warren Brown, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Adam Kosto (eds.), *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–16 at 15.

⁴ Morris, *Nemius*, 50 and 9.

the fifth to the twelfth centuries. As we have seen in the Introduction, early medieval insular authors recorded their understanding that contemporary Britain and Ireland were inhabited by four distinct *gentes*, around each of whom, as this book demonstrates, increasingly complex origin legends gradually began to accrete. As the author of the *Historia Brittonum* wrote:

In ea [Brittania] sunt viginti octo civitates et innumerabilia promuntoria cum innumeris castellis ex lapidibus et latere fabricatis, et in ea habitant quattuor gentes: Scotti, Picti, Saxones atque Brittones.

(In it [Britain] are twenty-eight cities and headlands without number, together with innumerable forts built of stone and brick, and in it live four nations, the Irish, the Picts, the Saxons and the British.)⁵

Here delineated as four *gentes*, the insular peoples were also commonly distinguished by language, as in Bede's remarks that

Haec in praesenti iuxta numerum librorum quibus lex diuina scripta est, quinque gentium linguis unam eandemque summae ueritatis et uerae sublimitatis scientiam scrutatur et confitetur, Anglorum uidelicet Brettonum Scottorum Pictorum et Latinorum, quae meditatione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est facta communis.

(At the present time, there are five languages in Britain, just as the divine law is written in five books, all devoted to seeking out and setting forth one and the same kind of wisdom, namely the knowledge of sublime truth and of true sublimity. These are the English, British, Irish, Pictish, as well as the Latin languages; through the study of the scriptures, Latin is in general use among them all.)⁶

Following the vocabulary of my sources, I have used the terms British, Irish, Pictish and Anglo-Saxon to refer to the four *gentes* depicted in insular origin narratives. To be clear, the present study is an analysis of these origin stories and the texts containing them. By no means can it be extrapolated that early medieval peoples who spoke a common language would have understood themselves to have a shared an 'ethnic' identity. Much good work has underscored the reality that in the early medieval period, insular peoples identified primarily with kinship or dynastic groups (and later kingdoms or regions).⁷ However, the authors who

⁵ Morris, *Nennius*, 59 and 18.

⁶ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, i.1, 16–17.

⁷ See e.g. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*; Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013); Fleming, *Britain after Rome*; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B. A. Seaby Ltd, 1990; repr. London: Routledge, 2003); D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 2nd rev. edn. (London: Routledge, 2000); David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800–1200* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to*

wrote early medieval histories and pseudohistories collected within them the origin stories of four distinct *gentes*. Let me explain what I mean, and do not mean, when I use the words ‘British’, ‘Irish’, ‘Pictish’, ‘Anglo-Saxon’, and other associated terminology throughout this book.

‘Britain’ and ‘Ireland’ refer to the islands of those names (Latin *Britannia* and *Hibernia*) as they were known during the early medieval period, not to any modern political entities. The term ‘British’ is used throughout texts containing early insular origin material and consequently throughout this book to refer to speakers of a language in the Brittonic family living in southern Britain from the post-Roman period to the twelfth century. Following the conclusions made by Huw Pryce in his seminal article ‘British or Welsh? National Identity in Twelfth-Century Wales’, I use the term ‘Welsh’ to refer to those Brittonic speakers who inhabited western Britain after the arrival of the Normans and ‘Wales’ for the region, following an internal shift in preferred terminology.⁸

As is evident in the passages from the *Historia Brittonum* and Bede discussed above, early medieval authors writing in Latin used the term *Scoti* or *Scotti* to refer to the Gaelic-speaking peoples who inhabited Ireland, parts of northern Britain, and the Isle of Man. Because this term would eventually come to signify the Scottish kingdom and people of northern Britain after the ninth century, I follow a scholarly convention which avoids confusion by offering more precise translations. The term ‘Irish’ encompasses Gaelic speakers living in Ireland who were characterised as belonging to a shared *gens* by contemporary sources. ‘Gaelic’ is used when referring to the entire Gaelic-speaking population of the insular region as a whole, and the Dál Riata to the Gaelic-speaking kingdom that stretched across Britain and Ireland.⁹ In insular texts, the ‘Picts’ are a distinct *gens* who inhabited northern Britain in the early medieval period. After the ninth century, the Pictish and Gaelic inhabitants of northern Britain formed one kingdom, known first as Alba and later Scotland, for which I use the terms ‘Scotland’ and ‘Scottish’.¹⁰

Finally, the phrase ‘Anglo-Saxons’ refers to speakers of the Germanic language known as Old English who inhabited southern Britain before the arrival of the Normans in the eleventh century. Bede describes the ‘Anglorum siue Saxonum gens’ (the race of the Angles or Saxons) using the singular *gens*, writing, ‘aduenerant autem de tribus Germaniae

Alba, 789–1070, The New Edinburgh History of Scotland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

⁸ Pryce, ‘British or Welsh?’.

⁹ On which see Broun, *The Irish Identity of the Kingdom of the Scots* and Ewan Campbell, ‘Were the Scots Irish?’, *Antiquity* 75 (2001): 285–92.

¹⁰ See Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*.

populis fortioribus, id est Saxonibus, Anglis, Iutis' (they came from three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes).¹¹ Early medieval sources preserved this origin legend that the purported 'Anglo-Saxon' *gens* sprang from disparate locations (as opposed to the British, Irish, and Pictish *gentes*). Throughout the pre-Norman period, individual kingdoms populated by Old English speakers continued to be identified as 'Anglian' or 'Saxon', and 'Anglo-Saxon' and analogous phrases were used, both internally and externally, to describe the collective of those kingdoms in pre-Norman Britain, inhabited primarily by Old English speakers and thus perceived by their contemporaries as distinct from the regions which were populated primarily by speakers of Celtic languages. I use the terms 'England' and 'English' to refer to the same population during the period following the Norman Conquest.

When it came to the Brittonic-speaking inhabitants of southern Britain, Pryce was able to answer the question 'British or Welsh?' by surveying the frequency with which these terms were used over time. For the Old-English-speaking inhabitants of pre-Norman Britain, the answer to the analogous question 'Anglo-Saxon or English?' has been made more complicated by the fact that sorting the evidence is often a case of 'translator's choice': ought 'Anglian' and 'Saxon' to be translated as 'Anglian' and 'Saxon', or as 'English'?¹² The point in time at which a sense of 'English' national identity began to develop has been much discussed.¹³ I have outlined the shaky foundations of attempts to project a unified 'English' identity back into the pre-Norman period in the Introduction above. This book is an analysis of origin legends as they were written by early medieval authors and not of any real-world process of ethnogenesis. Nonetheless, it is worth restating my objections to claiming early medieval texts as evidence of supposedly 'national' or proto-national identities. First of all, our sources are so limited that any arguments towards a unified 'English' (or 'British', or 'Irish', or 'Pictish') identity can only apply to a tiny, elite fraction of the overall (male) population. Secondly, the documentary evidence which does survive from the early insular world reveals that violence and warfare took place 'internally' as often as 'externally' when

¹¹ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, i.15, 50–1.

¹² For evidence of a political distinction throughout the pre-Norman period, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons* and Brady, *Writing the Welsh Borderlands*.

¹³ See Introduction, n. 32 above; Susan Reynolds, 'What Do We Mean by "Anglo-Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxons"?', *Journal of British Studies* 24 (1985): 395–414; and recently Susan Oosthuizen, *The Emergence of the English*, Past Imperfect (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019). I disagree with the very early point at which Oosthuizen argues for a unified sense of 'Englishness', and it is fair to say that most scholars of early British history would find difficulties with the extent of her 'peaceful assimilation' theory. See review by John Hines, *The Antiquaries Journal* 100 (2020): 464–6.

it came to these purported ethnic groups. Irish kingdoms fought against other Irish kingdoms far more often than they did against Anglo-Saxon ones, and vice versa. As I have argued elsewhere, language cannot be understood as a proxy for political alliance.¹⁴ In sum, then, while the origin legends treated in this study appear in larger works which are often understood as ‘historical’, it is important to bear in mind that the origin narratives themselves are literary objects. This book is not a study of real-world identities, but rather, it investigates the ways in which insular authors wrote about the origin legends of the four *gentes* whom they understood to inhabit Britain and Ireland in the pre-Viking period.

Part I: Gildas’s *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* and the Origin Legend of the Anglo-Saxons

A remarkable illustration of the interconnected nature of the corpus of early insular works containing origin material is the fact that three out of four of these origin legends were first recorded in a work from the literary-historical tradition of another people. These stories, moreover, were preserved in reverse ‘historical’ order. According to the corpus of insular origin legends – which, needless to say, do not reflect historical or archaeological reality – the ancestors of the British, Irish, Pictish and Anglo-Saxon peoples were perceived to have come to the insular region in that order. Yet the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, the ‘newest’ inhabitants of the region, is first recorded in the British Gildas’s *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, the oldest text in the insular corpus of works containing origin material. The supposed second-most-recent arrivals, the Picts, have their origin story first preserved by the Anglo-Saxon Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, the second-oldest text in the corpus. Finally, the origin legends of the peoples said to be the oldest inhabitants of the region – the Irish and the British – are first preserved together in the third-oldest text in the insular corpus, the British *Historia Brittonum*. The chronology in which these origin stories were recorded is our first indication of the highly literary, intertextual nature of the corpus in which they were preserved. The body of works containing origin legends as a whole began by recording current history before working backwards to fill in the gaps in knowledge, underscoring the literary and constructed nature of this corpus.

The earliest work in the corpus of insular texts containing origin material is Gildas’s *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*. Gildas was by his own admission British, but little else about him or the *De Excidio* can be stated

¹⁴ Brady, *Writing the Welsh Borderlands*.

with confidence: as Patrick Sims-Williams puts it, ‘all trustworthy information about him comes from his own words’.¹⁵ The *De Excidio* has traditionally been dated to the mid-sixth century, but this is based on rather slender corroborating evidence, in which ‘all we can say is that by the early tenth century an Irish annalist thought that Gildas flourished in the mid-sixth century and that his opinion was acceptable to a Welsh annalist’.¹⁶ An earlier date cannot be ruled out, as Guy Halsall has noted:

There is some evidence for an ‘early Gildas’, writing in the late fifth century. This includes Gildas’ rhetorical education, his Latin style, his theological concerns, and a rereading of his historical section and where he places himself within it. I tend towards this interpretation, although it cannot be proven. It is unlikely that Gildas wrote before 480/490 or much after about 550; beyond that we cannot go.¹⁷

I follow current consensus in referring to Gildas as a ‘sixth-century’ author. As Sims-Williams writes: ‘I shall be content to regard the *De Excidio* simply as a sixth-century work, written earlier than Columbanus’ reference to it *c.* 600, and later than the fifth century, because of Gildas’ vagueness about the known history of the early part of that century’.¹⁸ When discussing the *De Excidio*, it is also important to bear in mind that this is not a work of history which conforms to our modern understanding of such. Rather, it is most frequently (and accurately) characterised as a jeremiad. Gildas’s *De Excidio* is rich in biblical allusions and forms a *cri de coeur* against the sins, as Gildas understands them, of his fellow Britons, which have brought about their downfall from a height of Roman civilisation to the despair of contemporary times.

This singular work is the first insular text to preserve the origin story of the Anglo-Saxons.¹⁹ Gildas situates their arrival to Britain in the aftermath of Roman departure, when the Picts and *Scotti* from the north were attacking the Britons:

Itaque illis ad sua remeantibus emergunt certatim de curucis, quibus sunt trans Tithicam vallem evecti, quasi in alto Titane incalescenteque caumate de artissimis foraminum caverniculis fusci vermiculorum cunei, tetri Scottorum Pictorumque greges . . .

¹⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 6 (1983): 1–30 at 1.

¹⁶ See Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, 2–5 at 4.

¹⁷ Guy Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur: Facts & Fictions of the Dark Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 54.

¹⁸ Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, 5.

¹⁹ On Gildas, see also Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 36–49 and Coumert, *Origines des peuples*, 383–402.

(As the Romans went back home, there eagerly emerged from the coracles that had carried them across the sea—valleys the foul hordes of Scots and Picts, like dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm . . .)²⁰

Tum omnes consiliarii una cum superbo tyranno caecantur, adinvenientes tale praesidium, immo excidium patriae ut ferocissimi illi nefandi nominis Saxones deo hominibusque inuisi, quasi in caulas lupi, in insulam ad retundendas aquilonaes gentes intromitterentur . . .

Tum erumpens grex catulorum de cubili leaenae barbarae, tribus, ut lingua eius exprimitur, cyulis, nostra longis navibus, secundis velis omine auguriisque, quibus vaticinabatur, certo apud eum praesagio, quod ter centum annis patriam, cui proras librabat, insideret, centum vero quinquaginta, hoc est dimidio temporis, saepius vastaret . . .

(Then all the members of the council, together with the proud tyrant, were struck blind; the guard – or rather the method of destruction – they devised for our land was that the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken!), hated by man and God, should be let into the island like wolves into the fold, to beat back the peoples of the north . . .

Then a pack of cubs burst forth from the lair of the barbarian lioness, coming in three *keels*, as they call warships in their language. The winds were favourable; favourable too the omens and auguries, which prophesied, according to a sure portent among them, that they would live for three hundred years in the land towards which their prows were directed, and that for half the time, a hundred and fifty years, they would repeatedly lay it waste . . .)²¹

The aim of *De Excidio* is to explicate the moral decline of the British (as Gildas sees it) which brought about the divine punishment of the Saxon invasion. *De Excidio* is a highly allusive and difficult text, and there are still many points throughout this long invective where the historical background to Gildas's words remains unclear.²² This is because, as Sims-Williams has aptly stated,

as far as the *De Excidio* is concerned, we can best follow Wulfstan and describe Gildas not as a historian but as a prophet, a prophet not in the sense of a foreteller of the future, but in the Old Testament sense: a fearless critic of the evils of the present age who refers to past events and past prophecies only insofar as they

²⁰ Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 94–5 and 23. ²¹ Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 97 and 26.

²² See Neil Wright, 'Did Gildas Read Orosius?', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 9 (1985): 31–42; Michael Lapidge, 'Gildas's Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain', in Lapidge and Dumville (eds.), *Gildas: New Approaches*, 27–50; Michael Winterbottom, 'The Preface of Gildas' *De Excidio*', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1975): 277–87; Karen George, *Gildas's De Excidio Britonum and the Early British Church* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009); and Thomas O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures: Observing the World through a Biblical Lens* (Leiden: Brepols, 2013).

reveal the pattern of history, the origins of the present order, and the inevitable consequences of disregarding the moral laws of God.²³

Though as T.M. Charles-Edwards reminds us, Gildas ‘thought of himself as both prophet and historian’.²⁴

In the narrative of the *De Excidio*, then, the coming of the Saxons is understood as a divine punishment for the Britons’ sinful behaviour, explaining Gildas’s allusive language. Despite these difficulties, we can see that the fundamental core of the Anglo-Saxon migration legend is present in his account: three ships full of mercenaries arrive from the continental Germanic lands at the invitation of the Britons and remain to lay waste to increasingly greater swaths of southern Britain as a whole. Gildas’s *De Excidio* preserves the earliest recorded version of this origin legend, which – as we shall see – would come to be widely reproduced throughout the corpus of insular texts containing origin material. It is worth pausing to consider the fact that the earliest extant version of the Anglo-Saxon origin legend is preserved in a British source. This underscores the clear interest that all origin stories held for the authors of early insular historical and pseudohistorical works. Those who wrote these texts were interested not only in the origins of their own people, but also of everyone else who inhabited the region.

Yet while the British Gildas was the first insular author to record the Anglo-Saxon origin legend,²⁵ details in this narrative reveal the textual ghost of his now-lost source(s).²⁶ The story of the *adventus Saxonum* clearly drew upon an external source – whether written or oral – that had been in some amount of contact with Germanic peoples. Several key pieces of evidence indicate that Gildas did not invent the Anglo-Saxon origin story out of whole cloth. Linguistic evidence – that Gildas knew the

²³ Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, 2; see throughout for Gildas’s difficult historicity, as well as Ian McKee, ‘Gildas: Lessons from History’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 51 (2009): 1–36; Nicholas John Higham, ‘Gildas, Roman Walls, and British Dykes’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 22 (1991): 1–14; Bernard S. Bachrach, ‘Gildas, Vortigern and Constitutionality in Sub-Roman Britain’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 32 (1988): 126–40; Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend’.

²⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 203.

²⁵ There is a very good survey of the various versions of the Anglo-Saxon origin legend in Richard Sowerby, ‘Hengest and Horsa: The Manipulation of History and Myth from the *adventus Saxonum* to *Historia Brittonum*’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007): 1–19, though he is more concerned with how this legend might have fit into historical reality than I am here.

²⁶ Alex Woolf, ‘An Interpolation in the Text of Gildas’s *De Excidio Britanniae*’, *Peritia* 16 (2002): 161–7, has argued that this passage is a later interpolation. Whether or not this is true, as Sowerby, ‘Hengest and Horsa’, 2 n. 8 notes, ‘this does not undermine the earlier judgment on this episode that “the details come from the Saxons themselves”’ (quoting Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, 22–3).

Old English word *cyules* (*keels*) – suggests an Anglo-Saxon source. So too does the cultural evidence that he was familiar with their particular custom of auguries.²⁷ Historical evidence – Gildas knew that the Saxons were collecting tribute from the church in Britain – also suggests that he was in close contact with their culture.²⁸ Origin legends are of course ‘notoriously unreliable’ as historical sources, as this book is one of many studies to demonstrate.²⁹ Yet in focusing on what Gildas’s account of the Anglo-Saxon origin story reveals about the process of textual transmission rather than historical fact, it is clear that some external source stood behind Gildas’s version of this narrative, and there are good reasons to suspect that it was an Anglo-Saxon one.³⁰ Thus, even the earliest text in the corpus of insular historical writing relied on an external source for its origin material. Gildas’s early work illustrates the process by which the corpus of insular origin narratives grew: absorbing external pieces of information from all available sources in order to relate a coherent narrative of the history of the region as a whole.

Another key point first illustrated by Gildas’s *De Excidio* which is carried on throughout the corpus of early insular works containing origin material is the extent of intertextual connectivity that these works possessed. As Michael E. Jones has pointed out, ‘Gildas “Sapiens” enjoyed great learned repute in the Middle Ages, but he subsequently came to be seen as an isolated, obscure, and peculiar Latin stylist.’³¹ Yet Gildas was not writing in isolation, as has been painstakingly demonstrated by a host of scholars, particularly François Kerlouégan and Neil Wright.³² As their work has confirmed, Gildas was familiar with a wide range of texts, which he drew on as he composed the *De Excidio*. These included (or potentially included) the following works: the Bible, Jerome (*De Viris Illustribus*, the *Epistolae*, and the *Vita S. Pauli*), Euagrius’s translation of Athanasius’s *Vita S. Antonii*, Sulpicius Severus’s *Vita S. Martini*, a lost *Passio S. Albani*,

²⁷ Barbara Yorke, ‘Anglo-Saxon Origin Legends’, in Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham (eds.), *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 15–29.

²⁸ Nicholas John Higham, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 165. For general discussion on these points see Stefan J. Schustereder, *Strategies of Identity Construction: The Writings of Gildas, Aneirin and Bede* (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2015).

²⁹ Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, 22.

³⁰ See Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons’, 22–3.

³¹ Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 122.

³² François Kerlouégan, *Le De Excidio Britanniae de Gildas. Les destinées de la culture latine dans l’île de Bretagne au VI^e siècle* (Paris: Presses de La Sorbonne, 1987) and Neil Wright, ‘Gildas’s Prose Style and Its Origins’, in Lapidge and Dumville (eds.), *Gildas: New Approaches*, 107–28.

a Pelagian tract on virginity which may have been composed by a British author, Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* via the Latin translation by Rufinus, and Orosius's *Historia aduersum Paganos*. The *De Excidio* also contains potential parallels to the works of Livy, Cicero, Juvenal, Persius or Martial, and Claudian, as well as certain borrowings from Virgil's *Aeneid* (and potentially the *Georgics* as well) – to say nothing of those texts which his style parallels.³³ Thus, although Gildas has often been characterised as working in intellectual isolation, the *De Excidio* was actually in conversation with a number of prior and subsequent works. As Charles-Edwards has commented,

the significance of Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae* lies partly in the way it allows us to see the cultural connections between late Roman Britain and Britain and Ireland in the seventh and eighth centuries. Because of the assumptions that Gildas must have made about his readership, it shows that a late Antique rhetorical education persisted into the sixth century for laymen as well as for clerics.³⁴

In participating in these broader intellectual conversations, Gildas's *De Excidio* models the process of composition of the corpus of works containing insular origin material as a whole.

In turn, the *De Excidio* became very well known throughout early medieval Britain and Ireland in the centuries after Gildas wrote. As is the case for many other early medieval texts, 'the existing manuscripts of the *De excidio* are all considerably later than the composition of the text itself'.³⁵ The oldest manuscript of the *De Excidio* is London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.vi, which dates to the mid-tenth century.³⁶ Other important manuscripts include Avranches Public Library, MS no. 162 (twelfth century), Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. I. 27 (thirteenth century), and Cambridge University Library MS Dd. I. 17 (c. 1400).³⁷ However, we know that Gildas was well known and used throughout the early insular world thanks to references and excerpts in subsequent works. As Thomas D. O'Sullivan notes, 'the oldest important witnesses to the text are the extensive quotations in the Venerable Bede, which however are sometimes paraphrases, and the glosses on *De excidio* which are preserved in the late eighth century Leyden and Corpus

³³ Wright, 'Gildas's Prose Style', 107–114 for sources and 115–28 for style.

³⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 218; see 202–19 for thorough discussion of Gildas's intellectual/cultural background.

³⁵ Thomas D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas: Its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 3, and see also Paul Grosjean, 'Notes d'hagiographie celtique, no. 30: la tradition manuscrite du *De excidio* attribué à Gildas', *Analecta Bollandiana* 75 (1957): 185–8.

³⁶ It was damaged in the Ashburnham House fire of 1731.

³⁷ O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas*, 3–4 for discussion of the surviving manuscript tradition, of which these form the bulk.

glossaries'.³⁸ Gildas's *De Excidio* became a foundational text for many later authors, both those who were and were not interested in the origins of insular peoples in their writings. A sampling of early medieval authors who were familiar with Gildas's *De Excidio* and used it in their own writing includes Columbanus, Bede, Alcuin, Theodore and Hadrian at the Canterbury School, the author of the *Historia Brittonum*, Wulfstan, and Geoffrey of Monmouth.³⁹ These reuses of Gildas's text further underscore the interconnected nature of the corpus of early insular historical writing and the willingness of early medieval authors to utilise every available source at their disposal.⁴⁰

These intellectual chains of connection, moreover, continued throughout the centuries. Within the corpus of early insular texts containing origin material, Bede drew upon Gildas,⁴¹ the author of the *Historia Brittonum* drew upon both Gildas and Bede,⁴² and this material in turn spread from the *Historia Brittonum* into Irish tradition through the *Lebor Bretnach* and the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, as will be explicated further below.⁴³ There exists, in other words, a consistent pattern of connection to earlier works that runs throughout the corpus of early medieval insular texts containing origin material. These intertextual connections underscore the development of the corpus as a whole over time, with regular references back to earlier works.

As Gildas's *De Excidio* is thus the earliest text in the corpus to demonstrate, three out of four insular peoples' origin legends were first recorded not by a historian of their 'own' people. This fact highlights the interest within the corpus of early insular historical and pseudohistorical texts about the origins of the region as a whole. Such textual ghosts – moments in which we know an author was relying on an earlier source that is now lost – also showcase the intertextual nature of the corpus, in which no work was written in intellectual isolation. So too does the fact that no distinction is drawn between 'native' and 'foreign' sources of information in the *De Excidio*, a pattern that likewise holds true throughout the rest of

³⁸ O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas*, 3.

³⁹ Brian Christopher Hardison, 'Words, Meanings, and Readings: Reconstructing the Use of Gildas's *de excidio Britanniae* at the Canterbury School', *Viator* 47 (2016): 1–22.

⁴⁰ See Diarmuid Scully, 'Bede, Orosius and Gildas on the Early History of Britain', in Stéphane Lebecq, Michel Perrin, and Olivier Szerwiniack (eds.), *Bède le Vénérable: entre tradition et postérité*, Centre de Recherche sur l'Histoire de l'Europe du Nord-Ouest 34 (Lille: Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2005), 30–42.

⁴¹ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, xxx–xxxiv; Molly Miller, 'Bede's Use of Gildas', *English Historical Review* 90 (1975): 241–61.

⁴² Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 437–52.

⁴³ For a good overview of the texts in the Irish tradition and their difficulties, see Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 5–57.

the corpus. While Gildas was relying on an Anglo-Saxon source for his account of their migration legend, he does not dismiss their historical traditions as worthless or biased, but rather incorporates this narrative into his history without commenting on its source. Gildas's *De Excidio* is the first of many texts to illustrate the key ways in which the insular corpus of historical writing was built upon a complex web of intertextual connection.

Part II: Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* and the Origins of the Picts

Gildas's *De Excidio* is the earliest surviving work in the corpus of texts containing insular origin material by two centuries. The next work in this corpus is the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, which he completed in 731.⁴⁴ Bede spent his life as a monk at Wearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria after joining the community at age seven. He was a prolific writer – the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is one of over forty works authored by Bede, and he has enjoyed a reputation as an eminent scholar and historian from his own time to the present day.⁴⁵ The *Historia Ecclesiastica* covers the history of (southern) Britain from the time of Julius Caesar's first invasion in 55 BCE until Bede's lifetime, focusing on the gradual conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity after the Roman mission of Augustine to Kent in 597 CE. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* has always been an important source for the history of early Anglo-Saxon England. While earlier studies tended to take Bede's statements at face value, more recent scholarship has underscored the biases inherent in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, most notably its Northumbrian-centric focus. Deeply learned and steeped in late antique and early medieval intellectual traditions, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* draws on Gildas and other authors to relate the prehistory of Britain in a way that situates the origin legend of the Anglo-Saxons in broader world history.

It is here that the origin legend of the Picts – the second-most-recent people to arrive in the insular region, according to legendary tradition – was first recorded. Like the Anglo-Saxon migration story first documented in Gildas, the Pictish origin legend was first preserved in the historical

⁴⁴ On the origin material in Bede, see Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 51–84 and Coumert, *Origines des peuples*, 403–40.

⁴⁵ For Bede's life and works, see Michelle P. Brown, 'Bede's Life in Context', in Scott DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3–24 and George Hardin Brown and Frederick M. Biggs, *Bede, Part I, Fascicles 1–4, Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

tradition of another people, which itself drew on now-lost external sources. Yet Bede draws no value distinction between the historicity of the Pictish and Anglo-Saxon origin legends even though (as discussed further below) the Pictish origin legend derives from either a Pictish or an Irish source which now no longer survives. The Pictish origin legend has often been treated as exceptional because it depicts a ‘lost people’ from whom very little native textual material survives.⁴⁶ However, one of the aims of this chapter’s survey is to suggest that even if early Pictish historical narratives did survive, they would likely not depict the Pictish origin narrative much differently than did Anglo-Saxon or Irish works. Texts containing early insular origin legends drew information from wherever they could without making value distinctions between ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ source material. Understanding the process via which these origin legends grew makes clear the intertextuality of the corpus of insular origin material as a whole.

Of the Picts, Bede writes:

Et cum plurimam insulae partem incipientes ab austro possedissent, contigit gentem Pictorum de Scythia, ut perhibent, longis nauibus non multis Oceanum ingressam, circumagente flatu uentorum, extra fines omnes Britanniae Hiberniam peruenisse, eiusque septentrionales oras intrasse atque, inuenta ibi gente Scottorum, sibi quoque in partibus illius sedes petisse, nec inpetrare potuisse . . . Ad hanc ergo usque peruenientes nauigio Picti, ut diximus, petierunt in ea sibi quoque sedes et habitationem donari. Respondebant Scotti quia non ambos eos caperet insula, ‘sed possumus’ inquit ‘salubre uobis dare consilium, quid agere ualeatis. Nouimus insulam esse aliam non procul a nostra contra ortum solis, quam saepe lucidioribus diebus de longe aspicere solemus. Hanc adire si uultis, habitabilem uobis facere ualetis; uel, si qui restiterit, nobis auxiliariis utimini.’ Itaque petentes Britanniam Picti habitare per septentrionales insulae partes coeperunt; nam austrina Brettones occupauerant. Cumque uxores Picti non habentes peterent a Scottis, ea solum condicione dare consenserunt, ut ubi res ueniret in dubium, magis de feminea regum prosapia quam de masculina regem sibi eligerent; quod usque hodie apud Pictos constat esse seruatum.

(After they [the Britons] had got possession of the greater part of the island, beginning from the south, it is related that the Pictish race from Scythia sailed out into the ocean in a few warships and were carried by the wind beyond the furthest bounds of Britain, reaching Ireland and landing on its northern shores. There they found the Irish race and asked permission to settle among them but their request was refused . . . The Picts then came to this island, as we have said, by

⁴⁶ ‘The first obstacle to a study of literacy in Pictland is the complete lack of any surviving Pictish manuscripts’, writes Katherine Forsyth, in ‘Literacy in Pictland’, in Huw Pryce (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 39–61 at 39. On the Pictish legend, see Gearoid S. Mac Eoin, ‘On the Irish Legend of the Origin of the Picts’, *Studia Hiberica* 4 (1964): 138–54 and Marjorie O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973).

sea and asked for the grant of a place to settle in. The Irish answered that the island would not hold them both; 'but', said they, 'we can give you some good advice as to what to do. We know of another island not far from our own, in an easterly direction, which we often see in the distance on clear days. If you will go there, you can make a settlement for yourselves; but if any one resists you, make use of our help.' And so the Picts went to Britain and proceeded to occupy the northern parts of the island, because the Britons had seized the southern regions. As the Picts had no wives, they asked the Irish for some; the latter consented to give them women, only on condition that, in all cases of doubt, they should elect their kings from the female royal line rather than the male; and it is well known that the custom has been observed among the Picts to this day.)⁴⁷

As was the case in Gildas's *De Excidio*, Bede's use of an external source for the Pictish origin narrative is not made explicit here. Yet as a number of scholars have demonstrated, it is nonetheless likewise clear from the contents of this passage.⁴⁸ As A.H. Merrills states, Bede

assembled these short passages from a disparate array of sources, including, in all likelihood, annalistic material from the Irish foundation at Iona, circulating British and perhaps Pictish traditions and the ambiguous account of the *Picti* and *Scotti* provided by Gildas. Other than the *De excidio Britanniae*, few of Bede's sources have survived in contexts that can be examined with great confidence, but it seems clear that the historian represented only a single stage in an ongoing tradition of origin writing among these communities. Bede did not compose the prehistories of the *Brettones* and their neighbours from scratch, but nor did he inherit fully formed origin myths from his sources.⁴⁹

This intricately constructed origin legend was thus, again, not invented by Bede out of whole cloth but rather incorporated into the *Historia Ecclesiastica* from a non-Anglo-Saxon source.

While the external nature of Bede's source is thus clear, there has been some debate over whether the source(s) in question for this particular passage were Pictish or Irish. Those in favour of a Pictish source have pointed to the narrative's sustained focus, also noting that Bede seems to imply firsthand knowledge of Pictish culture with his statement that 'it is well known that the custom has been observed among the Picts to this day'.⁵⁰ Pictish expert Molly Miller even-handedly concluded that Bede's version of the Pictish origin legend was 'polite in manner and

⁴⁷ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, i.1, 16–19.

⁴⁸ D.P. Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 48 (1966): 341–71; McCann, *The Irish in the 'Historia Ecclesiastica Gentes Anglorum'*; A.M.M. Duncan, 'Bede, Iona, and the Picts', in R.H.C. Davis and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard Williams Southern* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 1–42.

⁴⁹ Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*, 282.

⁵⁰ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, i.1, 16–19.

literary in mode, historically it is Pict-centred, but could have come to Bede immediately from a Pictish, north-country Brittonic or Dalriadic source, secular or ecclesiastical, or have been common to all.⁵¹ The case for a non-Pictish source for this narrative relies on its similarity to Irish pseudohistorical writing and the fact that apart from Bede, the Pictish origin legend is preserved only in Irish texts. These, however, are much later in date than the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and are in actuality much likelier to have sourced the Pictish origin story from Bede than the other way around (discussed further below). The details of the narrative itself are also suggestive of an ultimate Irish origin for this tale. What Bede presents us with is not simply a legend about the origins of the Picts. Rather, it is a complicated narrative about the relationship between the Picts and the Irish in which the Irish are depicted as having gained a significant political upper hand in this encounter: they are able to both prevent the Picts from settling in their lands and ensure that future Pictish kings will be of Irish descent. In this legend, as I will discuss further in Chapter Four below, taking wives from another people seems to place political power into the hands of those who provided them.

This interpretation of the narrative would seem to point towards non-Pictish tradition as the ultimate source for this origin legend. Such a reading has indeed been suggested by Alfred P. Smyth, who writes that this origin story was ‘foisted on the Picts by the Irish’.⁵² Yet at the same time, James E. Fraser has argued that this narrative can be interpreted within the context of contemporary Pictish politics. He writes:

This sequence of notions surrounding the Gaelo-Pictish relationship makes it virtually certain that the legend was composed c. 700, about the time that Adomnán was completing *Vita Columbae*. Why? The man who became king of Picts in 696 or 697, another Bridei, appears to have based his claim to the kingship on being the son of Der-Ilei his (almost certainly Pictish) mother, his father Dargart having probably been Dargart of Cenél Comgail. As a Pictish king who claimed the kingship through his mother’s patrimony, Bridei’s situation is made perfectly and suspiciously legitimate by the origin legend, right down to the case of doubt – the expulsion of his predecessor – required for the mobilisation of the matrilineal argument. He was also a man of Gaelo-Pictish heritage – the origin legend suspiciously normalises that by assigning such heritage to all Picts. It is, therefore, intriguing that the legend also normalises Pictish recourse to Gaelic support in looking to make new settlements in Britain.⁵³

⁵¹ Molly Miller, ‘Matriliney by Treaty: The Pictish Foundation-Legend’, in Whitelock, McKitterick, and Dumville (eds.), *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, 133–61 at 134–5.

⁵² Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80–1000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 60–1.

⁵³ James E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795*, The New Edinburgh History of Scotland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 239.

Thus, there is a case to be made for either a Gaelic or a Pictish source for this legend, or – as is perhaps most likely – a blend of both, thanks to the proximity of Pictish territory to the kingdom of the Dál Riata in early medieval Britain.⁵⁴ (The close intellectual ties between these regions are discussed further below in the context of the *Lebor Bretnach*'s place of composition.)

Yet regardless of precisely where Bede's narrative of Pictish origins came from, the fact that the Anglo-Saxon author's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the earliest text in the insular corpus to preserve this material underscores the desires of early medieval historians to draw together the origin stories of the region as a whole. Bede's reliance upon an external, now-lost source for the Pictish origin legend reflects the level of intertextuality in the corpus of early insular historical writing while also reminding us how much written material has simply been lost from the early medieval period. Yet at the same time, such connections to now-lost texts demonstrate that a burgeoning corpus of insular origin material already existed at the time that Bede was writing. As he incorporated this material into the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, he did not distinguish between the value of Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Pictish, or British source texts. Rather, the Pictish origin legend simply became part of the history of the early medieval insular region.

Bede also drew heavily on Gildas's *De Excidio* while writing the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, continuing the chain of connections between texts in the corpus of insular historical writing.⁵⁵ Like Gildas, Bede was in turn also used heavily by later texts. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* was immediately and widely popular in the medieval period, and very early manuscript copies have survived: 'Bede's *History* is one of the very few works written in Latin before the Carolingian renaissance which have come down to us in copies virtually contemporary with their authors.'⁵⁶ There are over 160 surviving manuscripts of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* from both insular and continental Europe, where Bede enjoyed wide respect as a historian throughout the whole of the Middle Ages.⁵⁷ The *Historia Ecclesiastica* served as a source

⁵⁴ For historical and political background on Bede's relationship to the Irish and British, see Clare Stancliffe, 'British and Irish Contexts', in DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, 69–83.

⁵⁵ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, xxx–xxxiv. ⁵⁶ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, xxxix.

⁵⁷ See M.L.W. Laistner, with the collaboration of H.H. King, *A Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1943), which received a flurry of updates and corrections by individual scholars. More recently, Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, xxxix–lxxiv for discussion of significant manuscripts and recensions, and see the updated handlist of 'Complete or Once-Complete Copies of the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*', in Joshua Allan Westgard, *Dissemination and Reception of Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum in Germany, c.731–1500: The Manuscript Evidence* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2005),

for the author of the *Historia Brittonum*,⁵⁸ and Bede's work was also more widely known throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, incorporated into a variety of later works in the centuries after his death.⁵⁹ The *Historia Ecclesiastica* was also known to Irish scholars: though it has been little discussed outside of Irish scholarship, a fragmentary Irish translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* survives.⁶⁰ It was incorporated into a manuscript containing the *Lebor Bretnach*, which in turn became a source for the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. These two later Irish texts were crucial in promulgating the spread of insular origin narratives, as discussed in greater detail below. Like Gildas, Bede was an exceptionally learned author who drew heavily on numerous external sources while writing the *Historia Ecclesiastica*.⁶¹ Yet the Pictish origin story reminds us that while many of Bede's sources are known and survive elsewhere, that is not the case for all of them. Many have either been lost or were originally oral in nature, and crucially, by no means were all of them Anglo-Saxon.⁶² Although Bede is now remembered as the quintessential Anglo-Saxon historian, his presentation of the Pictish origin legend underscores the extent to which the corpus of insular origin material was multilingual, transnational, and heavily intertextual in nature.

Part III: The *Historia Brittonum* and the Origins of the Irish and the British

Within the body of insular origin tales, the Irish and the British were the two peoples believed to have inhabited the islands of Britain and Ireland for the longest period of time. The complete narratives of both Irish and British origins are first preserved in the third-youngest-surviving text to contain insular origin material, the ninth-century British text known as the *Historia Brittonum*, written a century after Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*

135–41. New manuscripts are still being discovered – see e.g. Nicholas A. Sparks, 'An Insular fragment of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 42 (2013): 27–50.

⁵⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 437–52.

⁵⁹ See Sharon M. Rowley, 'Bede in Later Anglo-Saxon England', in DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, 216–28.

⁶⁰ O.J. Bergin, 'A Middle-Irish Fragment of Bede's Ecclesiastical History', in O.J. Bergin, R.I. Best, Kuno Meyer, and J.G. O'Keefe (eds.), *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, vol. 3 (Halle, 1910), 63–76; Próinséas Ní Chatháin, 'Bede's Ecclesiastical History in Irish', *Peritia* 3 (1984): 115–30; and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Of Bede's "Five Languages and Four Nations": The Earliest Writing from Ireland, Scotland and Wales', in Clare Lees (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 99–119.

⁶¹ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, xxx–xxxiv; Brown and Biggs, *Bede, Part I, Fascicles 1–4*.

⁶² On Bede's potential use of oral sources, see e.g. Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', and Roger Ray, 'Bede's *Vera Lex Historiae*', *Speculum* 55 (1980): 1–21.

in 829–30, the fourth year of the reign of Merfyn Frych, king of Gwynedd.⁶³ Like the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the narrative of the *Historia Brittonum* encompasses the history of Britain from prehistory to Roman Britain to the early medieval period. Unlike Bede, however, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* did not extend his history forward to the present day (the most recent events discussed are in the late seventh century). As Charles-Edwards writes, the *Historia Brittonum* was

more a history of the Britons than of Britain, but it was one in which their relationships with other peoples – with the Romans, the English, and the Irish – occupied the centre of the stage. The effect was that it ranged over the British Isles as a whole and gave the Britons a place in the scheme of world history.⁶⁴

In constructing this insular narrative of world history, the *Historia Brittonum* included the origin legends of the British and Irish *gentes*. Yet continuing the pattern we have already seen for the origins of the Anglo-Saxons and Picts in the works of Gildas and Bede, the British and Irish origin narratives in the *Historia Brittonum* came not from British sources, but from now-lost external ones. Yet here, too, the presence of the Irish origin narrative in the *Historia Brittonum* alongside that of the British and Anglo-Saxons underscores the desire within insular historical writing as a genre to including the history of the region as a whole, even within works which ostensibly focused on one *gens*.

In the *Historia Brittonum*, moreover, both the Irish and the British origin legends are given conflicting, competing versions, illustrating how much of this material was circulating in the region at the date when the *Historia Brittonum* was composed. These competing origin narratives are also a testament to the value that was placed on all information within the insular historical corpus. Even though these legends were contradictory, no attempt was made to reconcile them into one cohesive narrative. At the point when the *Historia Brittonum* was written, competing versions of the same people's origin story were incorporated unproblematically alongside one another because all information on the history of the region was equally valued. Indeed, as was the case with Gildas and Bede, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* does not make value judgements between the worth of 'internal' and 'external' sources to his narrative. The *Historia Brittonum*, like the works of Gildas and Bede before it, illustrates the continued

⁶³ See bibliography in Introduction, n. 1 above. On the origin material in the *Historia Brittonum*, see Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 85–106 and Coumert, *Origines des peuples*, 441–502.

⁶⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 438.

intertextual nature of the corpus of insular origin writing as it grew over time.

The Irish origin narrative in the *Historia Brittonum* is confused and contradictory because it originally came from a now-lost Irish source and was preserved as best as possible in its earliest surviving form within this British text. The *Historia Brittonum*, when discussing the origins of the Irish, writes:

Novissime autem Scotti venerunt a partibus Hispaniae ad Hiberniam. Primus autem venit Partolomus cum mille hominibus, de viris et mulieribus, et creverunt usque ad quattuor milia hominum, et venit martalitas super eos, et in una septimana omnes perierunt et non remansit ex illis etiam unus. Secundus venit ad Hiberniam Nimeth, filius quidam Agnominis, qui fertur navigasse super mare annum et postea tenuit portum in Hibernia, fractis navibus ejus, et mansit ibidem per multos annos, et iterum navigavit cum suis, et ad Hispaniam reversus est. Et postea venerunt tres filii militis Hispaniae cum triginta ciulis apud illos et cum triginta conjugibus in unaquaque ciula et manserunt ibi per spatium unius anni. Et postea conspiciunt turrim vitream in medio mare, et homines conspiciebant super turrim, et quaerebant loqui ad illos, nunquam respondebant, et ipsi uno anno ad oppugnationem turris properaverunt cum omnibus ciulis suis et cum omnibus mulieribus, excepta una aiula, quae confracta est naufragio, in qua erant viri triginta totidemque mulieres. Et aliae naves navigaverunt ad expugnandam turrim, et, dum omnes descenderent in litore, quod erat circa turrim, operuit illos mare, et demersi sunt, et non evasit unus ex illis. Et de familia illius ciulae, quae relicta est propter fractionem, tota Hibernia impleta est usque in hodiernum diem. Et postea venerunt paulatim a partibus Hispaniae et tenuerunt regiones plurimas.

(But later the Irish came from Spain to Ireland more recently. Partholon came first with a thousand, men and women, and they grew until they were four thousand, men and women, and a plague came upon them, and in one week they all died, and there remained not a one of them. Nemet, son of Agnoman, came second to Ireland, and is said to have sailed over the sea for a year and a half, and then made port in Ireland, by shipwreck, and stayed there many years, and set sail again with his people, and returned to Spain. Later, three sons of a warrior of Spain came with thirty keels between them, and thirty wives in each keel, and stayed there for the space of a year. Later, they saw a glass tower in the midst of the sea, and saw men upon the tower, and sought to speak with them, but they never replied; and in the one year they made haste to attack the tower, with all their keels and all their women, except one keel, that was shipwrecked, in which were thirty men and as many women. The other ships sailed to attack the tower, and when they all disembarked on the shore that was around the tower, the sea overwhelmed them, and they were drowned, and not one of them escaped; and from the crew of that one ship that was left behind because of the shipwreck all Ireland was filled, to the present day; and afterwards they came over gradually from Spain, and held many districts.)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Morris, *Nemius*, 61 and 20.

Like the origins of the Anglo-Saxons in Gildas's *De Excidio* and the Picts in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, this legendary history of the Irish in the *Historia Brittonum* most likely came from an external source that no longer survives, in this case an Irish one. As many studies have demonstrated, the Irish origin legend had already undergone many layers of accretion that combined native Irish, classical and late antique, and contemporary medieval sources to create the form that this narrative takes in the *Historia Brittonum* by the time this work was composed in the early ninth century.⁶⁶ Work by scholars such as Heinrich Zimmer, Kuno Meyer, A.G. van Hamel, R. Mark Scowcroft, and John Carey has demonstrated that while the Irish origin legend undoubtedly preserves much native mythological material, it was shaped equally by the influence of imported intellectual tradition, notably biblical history, Jerome's translation of the Chronicle of Eusebius, Orosius's *History against the Pagans*, the writings of Isidore of Seville, and even the *Historia Brittonum* itself.⁶⁷ Carey's work has shown that while the *Historia Brittonum* preserves the earliest complete prose copy of the Irish origin legend, there are earlier poetic references to the figures in this narrative, indicating that the Irish origin narrative was circulating before it was recorded in its surviving form in the *Historia Brittonum*.⁶⁸ A recent important study by Michael Clarke has also demonstrated the likelihood of Carolingian influence on insular origin material, including the British and Irish origin legends in the *Historia Brittonum* as well as the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, discussed further below.⁶⁹ Yet these early texts are allusive, and no earlier complete narrative of the Irish origin legend has survived. The fact that the first place to preserve it is the British *Historia Brittonum* again illustrates the intertextuality of the corpus of insular origin material and the vibrant intellectual community that existed in this region during the early medieval period.

The evidence surrounding the Irish origin legend in the *Historia Brittonum* gives us a clearer picture of that which can only be filled in from the negative impressions left in the texts of Gildas and Bede, namely that there was a substantial corpus of earlier origin material that no longer

⁶⁶ See bibliography in Introduction, n. 83 above.

⁶⁷ Heinrich Zimmer, *Nennius Vindictatus. Über Entstehung, Geschichte und Quellen der Historia Brittonum* (Berlin, 1893); Kuno Meyer, 'Partholón mac Sera', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 13 (1919–21): 141–2; A.G. van Hamel, 'On *Lebor Gabála*', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 10 (1915): 97–197; Scowcroft, '*Leabhar Gabhála* Part I' and '*Leabhar Gabhála* Part II'; and Carey, *A New Introduction to Lebor Gabála Érenn and The Irish National Origin-Legend*.

⁶⁸ Carey, *A New Introduction to Lebor Gabála Érenn and The Irish National Origin-Legend*.

⁶⁹ Michael Clarke, 'The *Leabhar Gabhála* and Carolingian Origin Legends', in Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (eds.), *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship: A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 14 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 441–79.

survives circulating widely throughout the insular region and that the growth of individual origin narratives was contingent upon that of the corpus as a whole. As Carey writes, the '*Historia Brittonum* gives us only the outline of what was already a flourishing tradition of legendary speculation' at the time of its composition.⁷⁰ Even the earliest surviving narrative of the Irish origin legend shows the influence of the accretion of layers of material over time. The *Historia Brittonum*'s version of this narrative is so confused because, as many scholars have painstakingly demonstrated, it underwent patterns of narrative doubling as it grew.⁷¹ By the time that the surviving version in the *Historia Brittonum* was written down, Ireland had not one eponymous ancestor, but rather several waves of invaders.

These waves of invaders would only continue to grow over time. By the time the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* was compiled a few centuries later (discussed below), Ireland was believed to have been populated by six groups. First came a wave of settlers accompanying the antediluvian Cessair, then those following Partholón, then those of Nemed. After them came the Fir Bolg (descendants of Nemed's people who had left Ireland, been enslaved in Greece, and returned), the supernatural Tuatha Dé Danann, and the Milesians or the sons of Míl Espáne. As numerous studies have shown, the influence of other texts stands behind these ancestral groups. Carey writes that, 'Partholón and Míl Espáne look like scholarly constructs, the figments of men steeped in Jerome and Isidore; but Nemed and the Fir Bolg cannot be so easily accounted for, and they appear to reflect – at whatever remove – indigenous memories and speculations about the peopling of Ireland.'⁷² Partholón is the Irish form of the Christian name Bartholomew. As Meyer first argued, this name was likely given to the first man to settle in Ireland after the flood because it was interpreted by the early church fathers as meaning 'the son of the one who holds up the waters'.⁷³ The Milesians also owe their existence to the corpus of circulating origin material rather than to native Irish tradition. As Carey has argued, 'the name *Míl Espáne* is neither more nor less than a direct borrowing into Irish of the Latin phrase *miles Hispaniae* which we find in the *Historia [Brittonum]*',⁷⁴ meaning that 'the sons of Míl themselves seem much likelier to be the creations of medieval scholars than the heroes of a primordial tradition'.⁷⁵ As van Hamel first suggested, the original impetus for this moment of genesis can in turn be traced back

⁷⁰ Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend*, 11.

⁷¹ See bibliography in Introduction, n. 83 above.

⁷² Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend*, 9.

⁷³ Meyer, 'Partholón mac Sera' and Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend*, 8.

⁷⁴ Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend*, 8.

⁷⁵ John Carey, 'Did the Irish Come from Spain?', *History Ireland* 3 (2001): 8–11.

to late antique intellectual tradition – he noted that the Spanish ancestry of the Irish might come from Isidore of Seville’s depiction of Spain as the ‘mother of races’.⁷⁶ Carey has built on these conclusions to demonstrate the influence of Orosius’s *History against the Pagans* in connecting Ireland and Spain geographically and as a source for the tower of Bregon episode in the *Lebor Gabála*. He also finds Isidorian influence behind the idea that the Irish originally came from Spain, via Isidore’s derivation of the Latin name of Ireland [(H)ibernia] from that of Spain [(H)iberia].⁷⁷ Thus, even this earliest extant version of the Irish origin legend reflects the influence of a corpus of material that developed together as the legend grew.

So too does the continued lack of value distinction between internal and external source material. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the *Historia Brittonum*, which unproblematically presents two versions of the origin stories of both the Irish and the British side by side. The *Historia Brittonum* was thus less concerned with ensuring its information was ‘correct’ or its narrative perfectly synthesised than it was with collecting as much material on the history of the insular region as possible. Both versions of the British origin story, discussed further below, focus on the eponymous ancestor Brutus, who is given an alternate genealogy in the second variant. The two Irish origin narratives are quite different from one another: while the first, as we have just seen, combines native Irish with classical and late antique intellectual traditions to describe waves of invaders coming to the island, the second is modelled around Christian and biblical history and makes the Irish into a second tribe of Israelites.

However, a close reading of these two narratives reveals that this doubling is not actually contradictory. Rather, within the narrative of the *Historia Brittonum*, these origin stories are attached to two different Gaelic populations, one in Ireland proper and the other in Britain in the kingdom of the Dál Riata, as an apparent attempt to separate two conflicting origin legends for the same people. The second Irish origin tale in the *Historia Brittonum* reads as follows:

Si quis autem scire voluerit quando vel quo tempore fuit inhabitabilis et deserta Hibernia, sic mihi peritissimi Scottorum nuntiaverunt. Quando venerunt per Mare Rubrum filii Israhel, Aegyptii venerunt, et secuti sunt et demersi sunt, ut

⁷⁶ van Hamel, ‘On *Lebor Gabála*’, 173. See Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, and for recent studies see John Henderson, *The Medieval World of Isidore of Seville: Truth from Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (eds.), *Isidore of Seville and His Reception in the Early Middle Ages: Transmitting and Transforming Knowledge*, Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016); and Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (eds.), *A Companion to Isidore of Seville* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁷⁷ Carey, ‘Did the Irish Come from Spain?’.

in Lege legitur. Erat vir nobilis de Scythia cum magna familia apud Aegyptios, et expulsus est a regno suo, et ibi erat quando Aegyptii mersi sunt, et non perexit ad sequendum populum Dei. Illi autem qui superfuerant inierunt consilium ut expellerent illum, ne regnum illorum obsideret et occuparet, quia fortes illorum demersi erant in Rubrum mare, [iste gener Pharaonis erat, id est mas Scotte, filie Pharaonis, a quo ut fertur Scotia appellata fuit] et expulsus est. At ille, per XLII annos ambulavit per Africam, et venerunt ad aras Filistinorum et per lacum Salinarum, et cenerunt inter Rusicadam at montes Azariae, et venerunt per flumen Malvam, et transierunt per Maritaniam ad columnas Erculis, et navigaverunt Tyrrenum mare, et pervenerunt ad Hispaniam usque, et ibi habitaverunt per multos annos, et creverunt et multiplicati sunt nimis, et gens illorum multiplicata est nimis. Et postea venerunt ad Hiberniam post MII annos, postquam mersi sunt Aegyptii in Rubrum mare, et ad regiones Darieta, in tempore quo regnabat Brutus apud Romanos, a quo consules esse coeperunt, deinde tribuni plebis ac dictatores. Et consules rursus rempublicam obtinuerunt per annos CCCXLVII, quae prius regia dignitate damnata fuerat.

(If anyone wants to know when Ireland was inhabited and when it was deserted, this is what the Irish scholars have told me. When the children of Israel crossed through the Red Sea, the Egyptians came and pursued them and were drowned, as may be read in the Law. Among the Egyptians was a nobleman of Scythia, with a great following, who had been expelled from his kingdom, and was there when the Egyptians were drowned, but did not join in the pursuit of the children of God. The survivors took counsel to expel him, lest he should attack their kingdom and occupy it, for their strength had been drowned in the Red Sea [for his wife was Scotta, the daughter of Pharoah, from whom Scotia, Ireland, is said to be named]. He was expelled and he wandered for 42 years through Africa, and they came to the Altars of the Philistines, by the Salt Lake, and through Rusicade and the Mountains of Axaria, and by the river Muluya, and crossed through Morocco to the Pillars of Hercules, and sailed over the Tyrrhene Sea, and came to Spain, and there they lived for many years, and grew and multiplied exceedingly, and their people multiplied exceedingly. After they had come to Spain, and 1002 years after the Egyptians had been drowned in the Red Sea, they came to the country of Dal Riada, at the time when Brutus was ruling among the Romans, with whom the Consuls began, and then the Tribunes of the Plebs and the Dictators. The Consuls however held the State for 447 years, which had previously suffered the rule of Kings.)⁷⁸

The author of the *Historia Brittonum* was clearly familiar with two origin legends for the Irish, since this passage begins by characterising itself as the origin narrative for Ireland, *Hibernia*. Wanting to include both, yet aware that they conflicted with one another, he appears to have split them and attached one to the Gaels in Ireland and the second to the Gaels in the Dál Riata. This doubled legend reminds us that early insular authors wanted to include as much information as they had, even when their sources conflicted with one another. It also underscores the extent to

⁷⁸ Morris, *Nemius*, 62 and 21.

which the corpus of insular origin material was growing and spreading, even in the early ninth century when the *Historia Brittonum* was written. Finally, this origin story for the Gaels of the Dál Riata underscores the ways in which insular origin legends were deliberately crafted to match biblical and Christian history, shaped to parallel them over time.

The Irish origin legend in the *Historia Brittonum*, then, continues the patterns we have seen throughout the corpus of texts containing insular origin material. Its earliest surviving occurrence was in a text written by a British author, reflecting the existence of an extended corpus of origin narratives which has since been lost. In mentioning his use of these Irish sources, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* also demonstrates the intertextuality of this corpus. The fact that no distinction is drawn between the validity of the two different Irish origin legends underscores the *Historia Brittonum*'s interest in compiling all known information together. The *Historia Brittonum*, like other works containing origin material in the early insular region, has often been characterised as a synchronising history, a work that seeks to combine 'all the available, and often wildly contradictory, witnesses into a slick, coherent, and "official" whole'.⁷⁹ While the *Historia Brittonum* certainly can be seen to compile its evidence into a narrative which tells the story of the insular region over time, this text is less concerned with constructing one unified vision of insular history than has often been assumed. Indeed, the *Historia Brittonum* has so often been unfavourably compared to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* precisely because of the multiple and contradictory accounts of given events still present in this text, as its author seemingly sought to incorporate all or most of the information at his disposal into his work. This text illustrates the complex layers of connection between the works containing early insular origin material.

In addition to its narratives of Irish origins, the *Historia Brittonum* was also the first place to preserve the origin story that the British are descended from eponymous ancestor Brutus of Troy. This legend enjoyed significant popularity in the Middle Ages thanks to its inclusion in Geoffrey of Monmouth's influential *De gestis Britonum*.⁸⁰ Yet it was first recorded in the *Historia Brittonum*, where like the Irish origin legend, it was introduced in two contradictory accounts which derived from external, now-lost sources. The narrative runs as follows:

Si quis scire voluerit quo tempore post diluuium habitata est haec insula, hoc experimentum bifarie inveni. In annalibus autem Romanorum sic scriptum est.

⁷⁹ Dumville, 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*', 5–6.

⁸⁰ See Thea Summerfield, 'Filling the Gap: Brutus in the *Historia Brittonum*, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MS F, and Geoffrey of Monmouth', in Juliana Dresvina and Nicholas Sparks (eds.), *The Medieval Chronicle VII* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 85–102.

Aeneas post Troianum bellum cum Ascanio filio suo venit ad Italiam et, superato Turno, accepit Laviniam, filiam Latini, filii Fauni, filii Saturni, in coniugium et, post mortem Latini, regnum obtinuit Romanorum vel Latinorum. Aeneas autem Albam condidit et postea uxorem duxit, et peperit ei filium nomine Silvium. Silvius autem duxit uxorem, et gravida fuit, et nuntiatum est Aeneae quod nurus sua gravida esset, et misit ad Ascanium filium suum, ut mitteret magum suum ad considerandam uxorem, ut exploraret quid haberet in utero, si masculum erandam uxorem, ut exploraret quid haberet in utero, si masculum vel feminam. Et magus consideravit uxorem et reversus est. Propter hanc vaticinationem magus occisus est ab Ascanio, quia dixit Ascanio quod masculum haberet in utero mulier et filius mortis erit, quia occidet patrem suum et matrem suam et erit exosus omnibus hominibus. Sic evenit: in nativitate illius mulier mortua est, et nutritus est filius, et vocatum est nomen eius Britto. Post multum intervallum, iuxta vaticinationem magi, dum ipse ludebat cum aliis, ictu sagittae occidit patrem suum, non de industria, sed casu. Et expulsus est ab Italia, et arminilis fuit, et venit ad insulas maris Tirreni, et expulsus est a Graecis causa occisionis Turni, quem Aeneas occiderat, et pervenit ad Gallos usque, et ibi condidit civitatem Turonorum, quae vocatur Turnis. Et postea ad istam pervenit insulam, quae a nomine suo accepit nomen, id est Britanniam, et inplevit eam cum suo genere, et habitavit ibi. Ab illo autem die habitata est Britannia usque in hodiernum diem.

(If anyone wants to know when this island was inhabited after the Flood, I find two alternative explanations. The version in the Annals of the Romans is that after the Trojan War Aeneas came to Italy with his son Ascanius, defeated Turnus and married Lavinia, daughter of Latinus, son of Faunus, son of Picus, son of Saturn; and after Latinus' death, he acquired the kingdom of the Romans and the Latins. Aeneas founded Alba, and then married a wife, who bore him a son named Silvius. Silvius married a wife, who became pregnant, and when Aeneas was told that his daughter-in-law was pregnant, he sent word to his son Ascanius, to send a wizard to examine the wife, to discover what she had in the womb, whether it was male or female. The wizard examined the wife and returned, but he was killed by Ascanius because of his prophecy, for he told him that the woman had a male in her womb, who would be the child of death, for he would kill his father and his mother, and be hateful to all men. So it happened; for his mother died in his birth, and the boy was reared, and named Britto [Brutus]. Much later, according to the wizard's prophecy, when he was playing with others, he killed his father with an arrow shot, not on purpose, but by accident. He was driven from Italy, and came to the islands of the Tyrrhene Sea, and was driven from Greece, because of the killing of Turnus, whom Aeneas had killed, and arrived in Gaul, where he founded the city of Tours, which is called Turnis; and later he came to this island, which is named Britannia from his name, and filled it with his race, and dwelt there. From that day, Britain has been inhabited until the present day.)⁸¹

This legendary narrative, like the others presented in this chapter, underscores the intertextuality of the corpus of works containing insular origin

⁸¹ Morris, *Nemius*, 60 and 19.

material. When introducing the Brutus narrative, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* writes: ‘Si quis scire voluerit quo tempore post diluuium habitata est haec insula, hoc experimentum bifarie inveni. In annalibus autem Romanorum sic scriptum est . . .’ (If anyone wants to know when this island was inhabited after the Flood, I find two alternative explanations. The version in the Annals of the Romans is . . .).⁸² The direct source of this first legend is unknown, though reference to the ‘Annals of the Romans’ is also made in the eighth-century Hiberno-Latin *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*.⁸³ Dumville writes that, ‘whether or not it had an origin before the writing of *Historia Brittonum* is unknown, although if the author’s words be taken at face-value he derived it from an earlier source, *annales Romanorum*’.⁸⁴ As Charles-Edwards has explained, the ‘Annals of the Romans’ ‘must have contained an origin-legend of the Britons’, namely, ‘a narrative outline of the events commemorated in Virgil’s Aeneid’.⁸⁵ While the exact source of this first episode is lost to us, here we see that the author of the *Historia Brittonum* unproblematically incorporates two competing versions of the British origin legend into his text. No value distinction is drawn between them, but rather each is included to create as comprehensive a historical narrative as possible.

This is reiterated when the *Historia Brittonum*’s author introduces the second British origin narrative by commenting, ‘aliud experimentum inveni de isto Bruto ex veteribus libris veterum nostrorum’ (I found another explanation about Brutus in the old books of our elders),⁸⁶ repeating after he has related this version that ‘hanc peritiam inveni ex traditione veterum’ (this learning I found in the tradition of our elders).⁸⁷ The author of the *Historia Brittonum* cites his sources, but does not draw value distinctions between them. This second narrative of British origins derives from an early medieval genealogical tradition dubbed by its most recent editor, Walter Goffart, as ‘The Supposedly “Frankish” Table of Nations’.⁸⁸ A recent study by Patrick Wadden has underscored the myriad ways in which the Frankish Table of Nations’ genealogical tradition was put to use within different recensions of the *Historia Brittonum* as

⁸² Morris, *Nennius*, 60 and 19.

⁸³ Hermann Wasserschleben (ed.), *Die irische Kanonensammlung*, 2nd edn. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1885) and Roy Flechner (ed. and trans.), *The Hibernensis*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

⁸⁴ David N. Dumville, ‘*Historia Brittonum*: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age’, in Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994), 406–34 at 408.

⁸⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 445 and ‘Origin Legends in Ireland and Celtic Britain’, in Lindy Brady and Patrick Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

⁸⁶ Morris, *Nennius*, 63 and 22. ⁸⁷ Morris, *Nennius*, 63 and 22.

⁸⁸ Goffart, ‘The Supposedly “Frankish” Table of Nations’.

well as throughout insular historiography in general.⁸⁹ While this second tradition is included in the *Historia Brittonum* ‘almost begrudgingly’, as Wadden puts it, its presence is nonetheless a reminder that the author of the *Historia Brittonum* was reluctant to jettison any information, no matter how contradictory it appeared.⁹⁰

This pattern is even more obvious when multiple versions of events are included despite the fact that they are not just contradictory, but distasteful. After the version of the Brutus narrative said to be from the Roman annals, a side comment in some manuscripts of the *Historia Brittonum* notes,⁹¹ ‘haec est genealogia istius Bruti exosi, nunquam ad se, nos id est Britones, ducti, quadoque volebant Scotti, nescientes originis sui, ad istum domari’ (this is the genealogy of that Brutus the Hateful, who has never been traced to us, when the Irish, who do not know their origin, wished to be under him).⁹² Why would an early medieval author not want to be connected to Brutus, or consider him hateful? The explanation is found in his competing genealogies. In the version from the ‘Annals of the Romans’, we read, ‘Brutus vero fuit filius Silvii f. Aschanii f. Enee f. Anchise f. Capen f. Asaraci f. Tros f. Erectonii f. Dardani filii Iupiter, de genere Cam filii maledicti videntis et ridentis patrem Noe’ (Brutus was the son of Silvius, son of Ascanius, son of Aeneas . . . of the race of Ham, the accursed son who saw his father Noah and mocked him).⁹³ There is thus good reason why a *gens* would want to distance themselves from an ancestral figure who is part of the race of Ham. Thus, in the alternative explanation of British origins, said to be from ‘the old books of our elders’, Brutus’s genealogy is different. The full passage reads:

Aliud experimentum inveni de isto Bruto ex veteribus libris veterum nostrorum. Tres filii Noe diviserunt orbem in tres partes post diluvium. Sem in Asia, Cham in Africa, Jafeth in Europa dilataverunt terminos suos.

(I found another explanation about Brutus in the old books of our elders. The three sons of Noah divided the world into three parts after the Flood. Sem extended his boundaries in Asia, Ham in Africa, Japheth in Europe.)⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Wadden, ‘The Frankish Table of Nations in Insular Historiography’.

⁹⁰ Wadden, ‘The Frankish Table of Nations in Insular Historiography’, 31.

⁹¹ The recensions of the *Historia Brittonum* are discussed further below. Morris’s edition was a reprint of Faral, *La légende arthurienne*, itself an edition of the Harleian recension based on the text of London, British Library, MS Harley 3859. Morris included additional material from other recensions in brackets, taken from Mommsen (ed.), *Chronica Minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII.*, vol. III, 111–222.

⁹² Morris, *Nemius*, 60 and 19. ⁹³ Morris, *Nemius*, 60 and 19.

⁹⁴ Morris, *Nemius*, 63 and 22. Japheth’s connections to Europe stem from the biblical division of the world among Noah’s three sons (Genesis 9 and 10), though the concept of ‘Europe’ was initially quite fluid: see Denys Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957). The linkage of Japheth, Shem, and

In this version of British origins, Brutus remains the founding ancestor, yet his genealogy is switched from the shameful race of Ham to that of Japheth, from whom all the peoples of Europe were believed to descend. It is easy to see why Brutus's genealogy was altered in this way, yet my larger point is that both versions of his origins were nonetheless included in the *Historia Brittonum*. Another illustration of the same point can be seen when the author of the *Historia Brittonum* writes, 'in veteri traditione seniorum nostrorum septem imperatores fuerunt a Romanis in Britannia, Romani autem dicunt novem' (in the ancient tradition of our elders, there were seven emperors in Britain, but the Romans say there were nine).⁹⁵ The complexities of the *Historia Brittonum*'s sources underscore the intertextuality of the insular corpus as a whole.

In crafting his own work, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* drew upon Gildas and Bede, but also a wide range of other sources that have not yet been fully investigated: Roman annals, the *Annales Cambrie* and the 'Chronicle of Ireland', and Continental sources including Jerome's translation of the Chronicle of Eusebius, continued by those of Prosper and Isidore.⁹⁶ As Dumville has summarised,

the text is built on two processes of harmonisation of source-material. On the one hand the author set to bring together texts of Irish, British, English, and Continental origins, to adapt and in some measure reconcile the information of each with that of the others in order to provide a narrative sequence. On the other hand, the author sought to tie the Insular events of his account to a more general history – biblical, then Roman; he did so by peppering the earlier part of his History with deliberate synchronisms.⁹⁷

He also notes that 'what is perhaps most striking about our author's source-material is the extent to which it is derived from Ireland and England. This writer was notably outward-looking: it remains unclear whether his attitude was the result of choice or of necessity.'⁹⁸ Not only

Ham to specific regions of the world was further developed by late antique authors – notably Josephus, Jerome, Augustine, and Isidore – and had become widespread by the early medieval period; see James M. Scott, *Geography in Early Judaism and Christianity: The Book of Jubilees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Tristan Major, *Undoing Babel: The Tower of Babel in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 27–77.

⁹⁵ Morris, *Nennius*, 65 and 25.

⁹⁶ Dumville, 'Historia Brittonum: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age', 420 n. 91: 'A detailed study of the use of these sources remains to be made: all present scholarship relies on the *apparatus fontium* provided in *Chronica Minora Saec. IV.V.VI.VII* (ed. Theodor Mommsen, 3 vols, MGH, *Auctores Antiquissimi*, 9, 11, and 13, 1891–8) vol. III, 111–222 (with reference to his own editions of Prosper and Isidore in the same work).'

⁹⁷ Dumville, 'Historia Brittonum: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age', 419–20.

⁹⁸ Dumville, 'Historia Brittonum: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age', 425. One could argue that the answer to the question of whether the *Historia Brittonum*'s

the information contained within the *Historia Brittonum*, but also its structure, drew inspiration from external sources: ‘Irish pseudohistory provided a model (perhaps one among several) for the integration of an *origo gentis* with world-history . . . more particularly, the Irish national pseudohistory provided a model for the integration of a latinate world-history with national legend and a detailed example of synthetic method.’⁹⁹ Collectively, then, the *Historia Brittonum*’s patterns of source use illustrate the extent to which early insular texts drew upon as wide a range of sources as possible to compile comprehensive histories of the region.

Finally, like Gildas and Bede before it, the *Historia Brittonum* had a long afterlife. It was a popular text which survives in about thirty-five manuscripts (not including the five main manuscript witnesses of the *Lebor Bretnach*, discussed further below).¹⁰⁰ Our understanding of the *Historia Brittonum* is complicated by the fact that these manuscripts represent a number of distinct recensions, the most important of which are the Harleian, Chartres, Vatican, Nennian, Gildasian, and Sawley recensions.¹⁰¹ The oldest manuscript of the *Historia Brittonum*, Chartres, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 98, was destroyed during World War II. It has been dated by various editors to the ninth/tenth and more recently eleventh centuries.¹⁰² In terms of recensions, there is general consensus that the Harleian recension ‘preserves best the work as it was originally composed, probably in the year 829–30’, and thus it is this text which has been used throughout the present study.¹⁰³ Also of note is that there has been significant debate over the authenticity of a preface to the *Historia Brittonum*, found only in the Nennian recension, which attributes authorship of this work to someone named Nennius. Dumville has argued strongly that the Nennian preface is a later interpolation to the *Historia Brittonum*, but more recent arguments for its authenticity have been made by P.J.C. Field and Ben Guy.¹⁰⁴ The *Historia Brittonum* was widely known throughout the medieval period. Most germane to the focus of this book is the fact that the *Historia Brittonum* was

complexity was the result of ‘choice or necessity’ is ‘both’ – its author chose to write within a tradition that already, by the beginning of the ninth century, tended to encourage its authors to coagulate material from different sources and traditions.

⁹⁹ Dumville, ‘*Historia Brittonum*: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age’, 427.

¹⁰⁰ Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, 78.

¹⁰¹ See David N. Dumville, *The Textual History of the Welsh-Latin Historia Brittonum* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1975).

¹⁰² Dumville, *The Textual History of the Welsh-Latin Historia Brittonum*, 301–7.

¹⁰³ Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’, 78.

¹⁰⁴ See Dumville, ‘“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*’; Field, ‘Nennius and His History’; and Guy, ‘The Origins of the Compilation of Welsh Historical Texts in Harley 3859’.

the basis of the vernacular Gaelic translation known as the *Lebor Bretnach*, which in turn influenced the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and subsequent works of Irish pseudohistory, as discussed below. Most famously, the *Historia Brittonum* would later serve as a significant source for Geoffrey of Monmouth's wildly influential *De gestis Britonum*.¹⁰⁵ The *Historia Brittonum* thus continued the synchronising process of writing history that we have witnessed throughout the early medieval insular region.

Part IV: The *Lebor Bretnach*, the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, and the Continuation of the Corpus

All of the origin legends discussed in this book have now been introduced, but not yet all of the texts that contain them. The last main works to be discussed in this book, the vernacular *Lebor Bretnach* and *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, engage in the same process of pseudohistorical synchronisation of a broad pool of sources into one cohesive narrative. The *Lebor Bretnach* is a translation of the *Historia Brittonum* into early Middle Irish.¹⁰⁶ It has received less attention than many of the other texts in the insular historiographical corpus because it is a translation, yet this work is more than an Irish duplication of its Latin source. Extant manuscripts of the *Lebor Bretnach* reveal significant alterations to the text of the *Historia Brittonum* in both form and content, via the rearranging, omission, and addition of material. The differences between the Irish and Latin texts have of course been observed, but scholarship on the *Lebor Bretnach* has largely focused on its value for reconstructing an earlier Latin recension of the *Historia Brittonum* and as a source for the legendary history of the Picts, which is nearly the sole focus of its additional material. While these approaches have much to offer, the text of the *Lebor Bretnach* has been less often discussed as a unified vision of insular history in its own right.

The *Lebor Bretnach*, like the *Historia Brittonum*, has a complicated textual history that has impeded its study: no single manuscript contains the complete Irish translation of the *Historia Brittonum* and the additional material that together create the '*Lebor Bretnach*' as it appears in modern editions. As A.G. van Hamel, the text's most recent editor in 1932, states the problem: 'We shall divide the "complete" *Lebor Bretnach* into twenty-two sections; it must be borne in mind, however, that these are found combined in none of our MSS'.¹⁰⁷ The *Lebor Bretnach* is attributed to Irish historian Gilla Coemáin and was composed in the eleventh

¹⁰⁵ See Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, 121–72 and Jones, *Historical Writing in Medieval Wales*.

¹⁰⁶ See bibliography in Introduction, n. 82 above. ¹⁰⁷ van Hamel, *Lebor Bretnach*, v.

century,¹⁰⁸ to when the earliest of its five main manuscript witnesses, *Leabhar na hUidhre*, can also be dated. These five manuscripts contain six individual copies of the *Lebor Bretnach*, representing three recensions of the text.¹⁰⁹ Each of these recensions includes additional material on the legendary history of the Picts, but none contains all of the added material in its entirety. As Dumville remarks, ‘it is an interesting coincidence . . . that both sides of the tradition attracted Pictish material: “Version I” (La) has §4 and “Version III” has §§4, 6, and 7; “Version II”, on the other hand, has §§47–53’.¹¹⁰ The additional material in Versions I and II consists of a brief prose Pictish origin legend and Pictish king-lists. Version III also contains one of these king-lists in addition to longer prose and poetic versions of the Pictish origin legend and a narrative on the miracles of St Cairnech (discussed further in Chapter Three below).

In sum, the surviving manuscripts of the *Lebor Bretnach* preserve three versions of the text, one fragmentary and two fairly complete, each of which includes additional material not present in the *Historia Brittonum* but none of which includes all of that additional material. Dumville has argued that ‘the position of §§4, 6–7, and 24–25 as interpolations’ means that ‘these must be dismissed from the text presented by a new edition’.¹¹¹ Similarly, he writes that the texts of Version II

enjoy in common the feature of being followed by the Pictish and Scottish king-list and by the version of Bede. For reasons best known to himself, Van Hamel chose to print these (as §§47–58) as if they were an integral part of *Lebor Bretnach*, which they are certainly not. (§§47–58 must also be dismissed from a new edition.)¹¹²

While these points that the Pictish material was not part of the *Lebor Bretnach* in its earliest iteration are important, the text as it stands nonetheless shows us how the Gaelic-speaking world perceived insular history. The Pictish material became quickly linked to the *Lebor Bretnach* by those who recopied and circulated the vernacular version of this text, and as the

¹⁰⁸ Dumville, ‘The Textual History of the “Lebor Bretnach”’, 272: ‘The original translation, made during the eleventh century (and perhaps about the middle), derives from the so-called “Nennian” recension of the Latin text, which can itself hardly have been written at a very much earlier date’, noting further that ‘An attribution of the translation of *Lebor Bretnach* to Gilla Coemáin, the “synthetic” historian of the later eleventh century (*fl.* 1071/2), had become attached to the work not later than the first half of the fourteenth century . . . The authorship of Gilla Coemáin must be viewed with a certain scepticism, particularly in view of the early date of the derivative text in U, but no certain decision is yet possible.’

¹⁰⁹ Dumville, ‘The Textual History of the “Lebor Bretnach”’.

¹¹⁰ Dumville, ‘The Textual History of the “Lebor Bretnach”’, 266.

¹¹¹ Dumville, ‘The Textual History of the “Lebor Bretnach”’, 266.

¹¹² Dumville, ‘The Textual History of the “Lebor Bretnach”’, 266.

following chapters discuss in greater detail, these additions altered the narrative of insular history in some significant ways.

Thomas Owen Clancy has convincingly argued that the original translation of the Nennian recension of the *Historia Brittonum* into Gaelic as the *Lebor Bretnach* took place in Scotland rather than in Ireland.¹¹³ His conclusions further underscore the extent to which engagement with the corpus of texts containing origin materials stretched across the insular region. The *Lebor Bretnach* is an intellectual output of the Gaelic-speaking world, which encompassed both Britain and Ireland in the early medieval period. This text illustrates the circulation of historical and pseudohistorical material throughout the insular region, as Gaelic intellectual tradition in both Scotland and Ireland valued the *Historia Brittonum* enough to translate it and circulate that translation widely. Of similar relevance is the survival of a fragmentary Irish translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*.¹¹⁴ While its incomplete survival means that we know less about this text than the *Lebor Bretnach*, its existence likewise reflects the circulation and value of historical material across the insular intellectual world.

The *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, the last text chronologically in the corpus of insular works containing origin material, also represents the connectivity of this body of material. The *Lebor Gabála Érenn* is a compilation of Irish origin material which was first put together in the eleventh century but which clearly drew on older literary traditions that no longer survive independently in addition to the known material that it incorporates.¹¹⁵ The *Lebor Gabála* incorporates a wide range of sources including classical and late antique geographical and encyclopaedic works, biblical texts, contemporaneous Irish material, and the other texts in the early insular corpus of historical and pseudohistorical works. Bart Jaski has recently demonstrated the complicated extent to which the *Lebor Gabála* drew on a wide range of insular texts as sources,¹¹⁶ and as Clarke has

¹¹³ Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" Recension of the *Historia Brittonum*, and the *Lebor Bretnach*', in Simon Taylor (ed.), *Kings, Clerics, and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the Occasion of Her Ninetieth Birthday* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 87–107.

¹¹⁴ Bergin, 'A Middle-Irish Fragment of Bede's Ecclesiastical History'; Ní Chatháin, 'Bede's Ecclesiastical History in Irish'; and Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Of Bede's "Five Languages and Four Nations"'.
¹¹⁵ See bibliography in Introduction, n. 83 above, but particularly Scowcroft, 'Leabhar Gabhála Part I' and 'Part II' and Carey, *A New Introduction and The Irish National Origin-Legend*. See also R. Mark Scowcroft, 'Mediaeval Recensions of the *Lebor Gabála*', in Carey (ed.), *Lebor Gabála Érenn: Textual History and Pseudo-History*, 1–20.

¹¹⁶ Bart Jaski, 'The Irish Origin Legend: Seven Unexplored Sources', in Carey (ed.), *Lebor Gabála Érenn: Textual History and Pseudo-History*, 48–75; see also his "'We Are of the Greeks in Our Origin": New Perspectives on the Irish Origin Legend', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 46 (2003): 1–53.

recently argued, there is also a strong likelihood of significant Carolingian influence on the structure of the origin material in this text.¹¹⁷ As Scowcroft has pointed out, the textual history of the *Lebor Gabála* is so complex that

the most appropriate stemma for *Lebor Gabála*, could we construct it, would be the reverse of the classical stemma: scores of sources, tracts, poems and postulated versions would converge and sift together, in recension after recension – the work of generations of authors – until at the bottom would stand *omega*: the recension of Michael Ó Cléirigh [written in the seventeenth century].¹¹⁸

Unlike most classical and some medieval works in which an initially ‘clean’ authorial text becomes confused through inexpert copying over time, there was never a sole initial authoritative version of the *Lebor Gabála*. As Donnchadh Ó Corráin has pointed out, ‘the MSS exhibit re-workings of many kinds, creative and otherwise – re-writings, re-arrangements, contamination of differing versions (extant and lost), interpolations, &c. – and they represent rather specimens of a copious and dissonant written tradition from which modern scholars struggle to reconstruct “originals” often of their own imagining’.¹¹⁹ Each medieval recension willingly added new material that only became synthesised when Ó Cléirigh set out to compile a comprehensive version of the work in the early modern period. These difficulties are compounded by those of working with R.A. Stewart Macalister’s mid-twentieth-century edition: in Scowcroft’s words, ‘woefully incomplete, riddled with errors, and all but impossible to read’ and a publication which has ‘inhibited rather than encouraged critical enquiry’ into the *Lebor Gabála*.¹²⁰ Two important studies by Scowcroft have greatly clarified the situation, dividing the *Lebor Gabála*’s numerous manuscripts into four main recensions and providing a concordance to Macalister’s edition.¹²¹ Although the *Lebor Gabála* – like Gildas’s *De Excidio*, Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and the *Historia Brittonum* – is primarily a history of one people, it nonetheless draws together a significant range of sources to compose this history. It, like the rest of the works in the corpus of insular historical writing, underscores the intellectual connectivity of this region in the early Middle Ages.

¹¹⁷ Clarke, ‘The *Leabhar Gabhála* and Carolingian Origin Legends’.

¹¹⁸ Scowcroft, ‘*Leabhar Gabhála* Part I’, 88.

¹¹⁹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis litterarum Hibernensium*, 3 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), item 1141.

¹²⁰ Scowcroft, ‘*Leabhar Gabhála* Part I’, 82–3.

¹²¹ Scowcroft, ‘*Leabhar Gabhála* Part I’ and ‘Part II’.

Conclusions

This chapter has explicated the intellectual connectivity within the corpus of works containing insular origin material. Individual texts both borrowed from earlier works and in turn themselves became the source material for later authors as the corpus grew over time. Illustrating this pattern of growth and influence, we can see the expansion of the origin narratives themselves over time as well. In our first text, Gildas's *De Excidio*, only the Anglo-Saxons – the newest inhabitants of Britain – are given an origin story, while the British, Irish, and Picts who predate them are presented as if they have always lived in Britain and Ireland. Bede provides origin stories for the Anglo-Saxons and Picts, and the *Historia Brittonum* for the Anglo-Saxons, British, and Irish. Over time, every one of the insular *gentes* was provided with a complete origin narrative, including ancestors and a story of exile from an original homeland. These legends were written in response to one another, as a gap in insular history – where one *gens* had an origin story but their neighbours did not – led to curiosity about what events might have filled that gap.

The above discussion has drawn on textual evidence to articulate the ways in which early insular origin legends were created and preserved as part of an entangled corpus of history and pseudohistory. The next three chapters examine these connections more deeply through an extended study of three themes that grew to be particularly important in the origin stories of this region: exile, kin-slaying, and intermarriage and incest. This chapter has already introduced some of the ways in which origin legends gave each people in the insular region ancestral figures and a homeland from which they had originally come. The next chapter explores the concept of exile, the reason why a people's ancestors were said to have left that homeland in the first place. Chapter Three focuses on the concept of kin-slaying, which grew to become understood as the reason why that exile had originally taken place. Chapter Four is an extended study of the significant political roles that intermarriage between groups of peoples and incest within a group came to play after they arrived in their new insular homes. Studying these themes explicates the continued growth and mutual dependency of these origin narratives in the early medieval insular world.