

# Selections from Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*

Chapter 31. . . . Vortigern [Guorthiginus] then reigned in Britain. In his time, the natives had cause of dread, not only from the inroads of the Scots and Picts, but also from the Romans, and their apprehensions of Ambrosius.

In the meantime, three vessels, exiled from Germany, arrived in Britain. They were commanded by Horsa and Hengist, brothers, and sons of Wihtgils. Wihtgils was the son of Witta; Witta of Wecta; Wecta of Woden; Woden of Frithowald, Frithowald of Frithuwulf; Frithuwulf of Finn; Finn of Godwulf; Godwulf of Geat, who, as they say, was the son of a god, not of the omnipotent God and our Lord Jesus Christ (who before the beginning of the world, was with the Father and the Holy Spirit, co-eternal and of the same substance, and who, in compassion to human nature, disdained not to assume the form of a servant), but the offspring of one of their idols, and whom, blinded by some demon, they worshipped according to the custom of the heathen. Vortigern received them as friends, and delivered up to them the island which is in their language called Thanet, and, by the Britons, Ruym. Gratianus Æquantius at that time reigned in Rome. the Saxons were received by Vortigern, four hundred and forty-seven years after the passion of Christ, and, according to the tradition of our ancestors, from the period of their first arrival in Britain, to the first year of the reign of king Edmund, five hundred and forty-two years; and to that in which we now write, which is the fifth of his reign, five hundred and forty-seven years.

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Chapter 36. After the Saxons had continued some time in the island of Thanet, Vortigern promised to supply them with clothing and provision, on condition they would engage to fight against the enemies of his country. But the barbarians having greatly increased in number, the Britons became incapable of fulfilling their engagement; and when the Saxons, according to the promise they had received, claimed a supply of provisions and clothing, the Britons replied, "Your number is increased; your assistance is now unnecessary; you may, therefore, return home, for we can no longer support you;" and hereupon they began to devise means of breaking the peace between them.

Chapter 37. But Hengist, in whom united craft and penetration, perceiving he had to act with an ignorant king, and a fluctuating people, incapable of opposing much resistance, replied to Vortigern, "We are, indeed, few in number; but, if you will give us leave, we will send to our country for an additional number of forces, with whom we will fight for you and your subjects." Vortigern assenting to this proposal, messengers were despatched to Scythia, where selecting a number of warlike troops, they returned with sixteen vessels, bringing with them the beautiful daughter of Hengist. And now the Saxon chief prepared an entertainment, to which he invited the king, his officers, and Ceretic, his interpreter, having previously enjoined his daughter to serve them so profusely with wine and ale, that they might soon become intoxicated. This plan succeeded; and Vortigern, at the instigation of the devil, and enamoured with the beauty of the damsel, demanded her, through the medium of his interpreter, of the father, promising to give for her whatever he should ask. Then Hengist, who had already consulted with the elders who

attended him of the Oghul race, demanded for his daughter the province, called in English, Centland, in British, Ceint, (Kent.) This cession was made without the knowledge of the king, Guoyrancgonus, who then reigned in Kent, and who experienced no inconsiderable share of grief, from seeing his kingdom thus clandestinely, fraudulently, and imprudently resigned to foreigners. Thus the maid was delivered up to the king, who slept with her, and loved her exceedingly.

Chapter 38. Hengist, after this, said to Vortigern, "I will be to you both a father and an adviser; despise not my counsels, and you shall have no reason to fear being conquered by any man or any nation whatever; for the people of my country are strong, warlike, and robust: if you approve, I will send for my son and his brother, both valiant men who at my invitation will fight against the Scots, and you can give them the countries in the north, near the wall called Gual. "The incautious sovereign having assented to this, Octa and Ebusa arrived with forty ships. In these they sailed round the country of the Picts, laid waste the Orkneys, and took possession of many regions, even to the Pictish confines.

But Hengist continued, by degrees, sending for ships from his own country, so that some islands whence they came were left without inhabitants; and whilst his people were increasing in power and number, they came to the above-named province of Kent.

Chapter 39. In the meantime, Vortigern, as if desirous of adding to the evils he had already occasioned, married his own daughter, by whom he had a son. When this was made known to St. Germanus, he came, with all the British clergy, to reprove him: and whilst a numerous assembly of the ecclesiastics and laity were in consultation, the weak king ordered his daughter to appear before them, and in the presence of all to present her son to St. Germanus, and declare that he was the father of the child. The immodest woman obeyed; and St. Germanus, taking the child, said, "I will be a father to you, my son; nor will I dismiss you till a razor, scissors, and comb, are given to me, and it is allowed you to give them to your carnal father." The child obeyed St. Germanus, and, going to his father Vortigern, said to him, "Thou art my father; shave and cut the hair of my head." The king blushed, and was silent; and, without replying to the child, arose in great anger, and fled from the presence of St. Germanus, execrated and condemned by the whole synod.

Chapter 40. But soon after, calling together his twelve wise men, to consult what was to be done, they said to him, "Retire to the remote boundaries of your kingdom; there build and fortify a city to defend yourself, for the people you have received are treacherous; they are seeking to subdue you by stratagem, and, even during your life, to seize upon all the countries subject to your power, how much more will they attempt, after your death!" The king, pleased with this advice, departed with his wise men, and travelled through many parts of his territories, in search of a place convenient for the purpose of building a citadel. Having, to no purpose, travelled far and wide, they came at length to a province called Guenet; and having surveyed the mountains of Heremus, they discovered, on the summit of one of them, a situation, adapted to the construction of a citadel. Upon this, the wise men said to the king, "Build here a city; for, in this place, it will

ever be secure against the barbarians." Then the king sent for artificers, carpenters, stone-masons, and collected all the materials requisite to building; but the whole of these disappeared in one night, so that nothing remained of what had been provided for the constructing of the citadel. Materials were, therefore, from all parts, procured a second and third time, and again vanished as before, leaving and rendering every effort ineffectual. Vortigern inquired of his wise men the cause of this opposition to his undertaking, and of so much useless expense of labour? They replied, "You must find a child born without a father, put him to death, and sprinkle with his blood the ground on which the citadel is to be built, or you will never accomplish your purpose."

Chapter 41. In consequence of this reply, the king sent messengers throughout Britain, in search of a child born without a father. After having inquired in all the provinces, they came to the field of Ælecti, in the district of Glevesing, where a party of boys were playing at ball. And two of them quarrelling, one said to the other, "O boy without a father, no good will ever happen to you." Upon this, the messengers diligently inquired of the mother and the other boys, whether he had had a father? Which his mother denied, saying, "In what manner he was conceived I know not, for I have never had intercourse with any man;" and then she solemnly affirmed that he had no mortal father. The boy was, therefore, led away, and conducted before Vortigern the king.

Chapter 42. A meeting took place the next day for the purpose of putting him to death. Then the boy said to the king, "Why have your servants brought me hither?" "That you may be put to death," replied the king, "and that the ground on which my citadel is to stand, may be sprinkled with your blood, without which I shall be unable to build it." "Who," said the boy, "instructed you to do this?" "My wise men," answered the king. "Order them hither," returned the boy; this being complied with, he thus questioned them: "By what means was it revealed to you that this citadel could not be built, unless the spot were previously sprinkled with my blood? Speak without disguise, and declare who discovered me to you;" then turning to the king, "I will soon," said he, "unfold to you every thing; but I desire to question your wise men, and wish them to disclose to you what is hidden under this pavement:" they acknowledging their ignorance, "there is," said he, "a pool; come and dig:" they did so, and found the pool. "Now," continued he, "tell me what is in it;" but they were ashamed, and made no reply. "I," said the boy, "can discover it to you: there are two vases in the pool;" they examined, and found it so: continuing his questions, "What is in the vases?" they were silent: "there is a tent in them," said the boy; "separate them, and you shall find it so;" this being done by the king's command, there was found in them a folded tent. The boy, going on with his questions, asked the wise men what was in it? But they not knowing what to reply, "There are," said he, "two serpents, one white and the other red; unfold the tent;" they obeyed, and two sleeping serpents were discovered; "consider attentively," said the boy, "what they are doing." The serpents began to struggle with each other; and the white one, raising himself up, threw down the other into the middle of the tent, and sometimes drove him to the edge of it; and this was repeated thrice. At length the red one, apparently the weaker of the two, recovering his strength, expelled the white one from the tent; and the latter being pursued through the pool by the red one, disappeared. Then the boy, asking the wise men what was signified by this wonderful omen, and they expressing their ignorance, he said to the king, "I will now unfold to you the meaning of this mystery. The pool is the emblem of this

world, and the tent that of your kingdom: the two serpents are two dragons; the red serpent is your dragon, but the white serpent is the dragon of the people who occupy several provinces and districts of Britain, even almost from sea to sea: at length, however, our people shall rise and drive away the Saxon race from beyond the sea, whence they originally came; but do you depart from this place, where you are not permitted to erect a citadel; I, to whom fate has allotted this mansion, shall remain here; whilst to you it is incumbent to seek other provinces, where you may build a fortress." "What is your name?" asked the king: "I am called Ambrose (in British Embresguletic)," returned the boy; and in answer to the king's question, "What is your origin?" he replied, "A Roman consul was my father."

Then the king assigned him that city, with all the western provinces of Britain; and departing with his wise men to the sinistral district, he arrived in the region named Gueneri, where he built a city which, according to his name, was called Cair Guorthegirn.

Chapter 43. At length Vortimer, the son of Vortigern, valiantly fought against Hengist, Horsa, and his people; drove them to the isle of Thanet, and thrice enclosed them within it, and beset them on the western side.

The Saxons now despatched deputies to Germany to solicit large reinforcements, and an additional number of ships: having obtained these, they fought against the kings and princes of Britain, and sometimes extended their boundaries by victory, and sometimes were conquered and driven back.

Chapter 44. Four times did Vortimer valorously encounter the enemy; the first has been mentioned, the second was upon the river Darent, the third at the Ford, in their language called Epsford, though in ours Set thirgabail, there Horsa fell, and Catigern, the son of Vortigern; the fourth battle he fought, was near the stone on the shore of the Gallic sea, where the Saxons being defeated, fled to their ships.

After a short interval Vortimer died; before his decease, anxious for the future prosperity of his country, he charged his friends to inter his body at the entrance of the Saxon port, viz. upon the rock where the Saxons first landed; "for though," said he, "they may inhabit other parts of Britain, yet if you follow my commands, they will never remain in this island." They imprudently disobeyed this last injunction, and neglected to bury him where he had appointed.

Chapter 45. After this the barbarians became firmly incorporated, and were assisted by foreign pagans; for Vortigern was their friend, on account of the daughter of Hengist, whom he so much loved, that no one durst fight against him--in the meantime they soothed the imprudent king, and whilst practising every appearance of fondness, were plotting with his enemies. And let him that reads understand, that the Saxons were victorious, and ruled Britain, not from their superior prowess, but on account of the great sins of the Britons: God so permitting it.

For what wise man will resist the wholesome counsel of God? The Almighty is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, ruling and judging every one, according to his own pleasure.

After the death of Vortimer, Hengist being strengthened by new accessions, collected his ships, and calling his leaders together, consulted by what stratagem they might overcome Vortigern and his army; with insidious intention they sent messengers to the king, with offers of peace and perpetual friendship; unsuspecting of treachery, the monarch, after advising with his elders, accepted the proposals.

Chapter 46. Hengist, under pretence of ratifying the treaty, prepared an entertainment, to which he invited the king, the nobles, and military officers, in number about three hundred; speciously concealing his wicked intention, he ordered three hundred Saxons to conceal each a knife under his feet, and to mix with the Britons; "and when," said he, "they are sufficiently inebriated, &c. cry out, 'Nimed eure Saxes,' then let each draw his knife, and kill his man; but spare the king, on account of his marriage with my daughter, for it is better that he should be ransomed than killed."

The king with his company, appeared at the feast; and mixing with the Saxons, who, whilst they spoke peace with their tongues, cherished treachery in their hearts, each man was placed next his enemy.

After they had eaten and drunk, and were much intoxicated, Hengist suddenly vociferated, "Nimed eure Saxes!" and instantly his adherents drew their knives, and rushing upon the Britons, each slew him that sat next to him, and there was slain three hundred of the nobles of Vortigern. The king being a captive, purchased his redemption, by delivering up the three provinces of East, South, and Middle Sex, besides other districts at the option of his betrayers.

Chapter 47. St. Germanus admonished Vortigern to turn to the true God, and abstain from all unlawful intercourse with his daughter; but the unhappy wretch fled for refuge to the province Guorthegirnaim, so called from his own name, where he concealed himself with his wives: but St. Germanus followed him with all the British clergy, and upon a rock prayed for his sins during forty days and forty nights.

The blessed man was unanimously chosen commander against the Saxons. And then, not by the clang of trumpets, but by praying, singing hallelujah, and by the cries of the army to God, the enemies were routed, and driven even to the sea.

Again Vortigern ignominiously fled from St. Germanus to the kingdom of the Dimetæ, where, on the river Towy, he built a castle, which he named Cair Guothergirn. The saint, as usual, followed him there, and with his clergy fasted and prayed to the Lord three days, and as many nights. On the third night, at the third hour, fire fell suddenly from heaven, and totally burned the castle. Vortigern, the daughter of Hengist, his other wives, and all the inhabitants, both men and women, miserably perished: such was the end of this unhappy king, as we find written in the life of St. Germanus.

Chapter 48. Others assure us, that being hated by all the people of Britain, for having received the Saxons, and being publicly charged by St. Germanus and the clergy in the sight of God, he betook himself to flight; and, that deserted and a wanderer, he sought a place of refuge, till broken hearted, he made an ignominious end.

Some accounts state, that the earth opened and swallowed him up, on the night his castle was burned; as no remains were discovered the following morning, either of him, or of those who were burned with him.

He had three sons: the eldest was Vortimer, who, as we have seen, fought four times against the Saxons, and put them to flight; the second Categirn, who was slain in the same battle with Horsa; the third was Pascent, who reigned in the two provinces Builth and Guorthegirnaim, after the death of his father. These were granted him by Ambrosius, who was the great king among the kings of Britain. The fourth was Faustus, born of an incestuous marriage with his daughter, who was brought up and educated by St. Germanus. He built a large monastery on the banks of the river Renis, called after his name, and which remains to the present period.

Chapter 49. This is the genealogy of Vortigern, which goes back to Fernvail, who reigned in the kingdom of Guorthegirnaim, and was the son of Teudor; Teudor was the son of Pascent; Pascent of Guoidcant; Guoidcant of Moriud; Moriud of Eltat; Eltat of Eldoc; Eldoc of Paul; Paul of Meuprit; Meuprit of Braciat; Braciat of Pascent; Pascent of Guorthegirn; Guorthegirn of Guortheneu; Guortheneu of Guitaul; Guitaul of Guitolion; Guitolion of Gloui. Bonus, Paul, Mauron, Guotelin, were four brothers, who built Gloiuda, a great city upon the banks of the river Severn, and in British is called Cair Gloui, in Saxon, Gloucester. Enough has been said of Vortigern.

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Chapter 56. At that time, the Saxons grew strong by virtue of their large number and increased in power in Britain. Hengist having died, however, his son Octha crossed from the northern part of Britain to the kingdom of Kent and from him are descended the kings of Kent. Then Arthur along with the kings of Britain fought against them in those days, but Arthur himself was the military commander ["dux bellorum"]. His first battle was at the mouth of the river which is called Glein. His second, third, fourth, and fifth battles were above another river which is called Dubglas and is in the region of Linnuis. The sixth battle was above the river which is called Bassas. The seventh battle was in the forest of Celidon, that is Cat Coit Celidon. The eighth battle was at the fortress of Guinnion, in which Arthur carried the image of holy Mary ever virgin on his shoulders; and the pagans were put to flight on that day. And through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and through the power of the blessed Virgin Mary his mother there was great slaughter among them. The ninth battle was waged in the City of the Legion. The tenth battle was waged on the banks of a river which is called Tribruit. The eleventh battle was fought on the mountain which is called Agnet. The twelfth battle was on Mount Badon in which there fell in one day 960 men from one charge by Arthur; and no one struck them down except Arthur himself, and in all the wars he emerged as victor. And while they were being defeated in all the

battles, they were seeking assistance from Germany and their numbers were being augmented many times over without interruption. And they brought over kings from Germany that they might reign over them in Britain, right down to the time in which Ida reigned, who was son of Eobba. He was the first king in Bernicia, i.e., in Berneich.

Chapter 73. There is another marvel in the region which is called Buel. There is a mound of stones there and one stone placed above the pile with the pawprint of a dog in it. When Cabal, who was the dog of Arthur the soldier, was hunting the boar Troynt, he impressed his print in the stone, and afterwards Arthur assembled a stone mound under the stone with the print of his dog, and it is called the Carn Cabal. And men come and remove the stone in their hands for the length of a day and a night; and on the next day it is found on top of its mound.

There is another wonder in the region which is called Ercing. A tomb is located there next to a spring which is called Licat Amr; and the name of the man who is buried in the tomb was called thus: Amr. He was the son of Arthur the soldier, and Arthur himself killed and buried him in that very place. And men come to measure the grave and find it sometimes six feet in length, sometimes nine, sometimes twelve, sometimes fifteen. At whatever length you might measure it at one time, a second time you will not find it to have the same length--and I myself have put this to the test.

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**Source:**

*Six Old English Chronicles*. ed. J. A. Giles. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848.

Giles is the source of the translation of Chapters 31 and 36-49. Translation of Chapters 56 and 73 is by ACL.

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