



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

THE BATTLE OF MAES GARMON



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The Battles of Maes Garmon

Introduction

The Romano British defeat a force of Saxons & Picts 429 - 430 AD.

The End of Romano Britain

In the confusion that followed the end of Roman Britain it is often difficult to establish fact from fiction. The records of the period, those that survive, are often difficult to verify and many of the sources are both contradictory and were not written by contemporary authors who could have recorded the events as seen by actual witnesses.

One such event is the battle of Maes Garmon. It may have a local connection, as tradition places its location in a field on the outskirts of the North Welsh town of Mold.

There is even a monument which claims that the battle was fought in the field where it stands. The field is known as the site of the 'Goblin's well' and is it also called the field of St. Germanus.



THE ALLELUIA MONUMENT, NEAR MOLD, NORTH WALES. THE REPUTED SITE OF THE BATTLE OF MAES GARMON 429 OR 430 AD. ERECTED IN 18TH CENTURY – WIKIPEDIA COMMONS FREE MEDIA REPOSITORY.

One has to often take a leap of faith when dealing with identifying the site of an ancient, and in this case, an almost mythical or legendary event but local tradition has to be respected and whether or not this location is the actual battlefield, the tale is worth telling.

Legend refers to this battle as the 'Alleluia Victory'. The Commander of the Romano-British army was the Bishop of Auxerre, Germanus. He was a Roman citizen of noble birth and had been born in Gaul. He had served at the Imperial court in Rome and had attained a position as a high ranking official.

He was promoted to the position of Governor of Armorica by the Emperor Flavius Honorius, a position that he held for several years.

Being a devout Christian, he would later abandon his Imperial position to become a member of the clergy in order that he could promote the Catholic church in Western Europe. He would be consecrated as the Bishop of Auxerre in 418 AD.

Whilst the Roman army had withdrawn from Britain in about 400 AD and the Romano British rulers had expelled the last Roman officials in 409, (therefore withdrawing from Imperial rule), the church was still determined that Christianity would become widely established within the former province.

Pelagianism was a Christian theological cult that was gaining support in Britain. It preached that original sin did not taint human nature and that humans had free will granted by Divine Grace. This form of Christianity was advocated by the British born theologian Pelagius who moved to Rome to preach his version of Christianity. This upset the Catholic Church who considered it heresy and Pelagius was driven from Rome. He would travel the Empire for many years promoting his teachings and he was last recorded as living in Egypt but nothing more is known about his later life.

Concerned that Pelagianism was favoured and growing in Britain, a synod of Bishops in Gaul, sent Bishop Germanus to Britain along with Bishop Lupus of Troyes as his second in command. Later in life, in 451 AD, Lupus would meet with Atilla the Hun and successfully persuade him to spare the city of Troyes during the great Hunnic invasions.

Germanus was able to re-establish the Pope's authority in Britain and the cult of Pelagianism went into decline.

Sometime in 429 or 430 AD, history states that a combined army of Saxons and Picts were raiding in North Wales. This in itself raises questions as the Saxons at this time were making incursions into the South East of what is now England, whilst the Picts were based to the North beyond Hadrian's wall. That they were allies in such an early period must have been an alarming concern for the Romano-British.

These peoples had combined forces previously, namely during the 'Great Pelagianism Conspiracy' of 367 AD, when Saxon, Jutes, Angles, Franks, Irish, Scots and Picts had overrun the Roman garrisons of Britannia and had caused havoc and destruction within the province until an Imperial army led by Theodosius had arrived from the continent and restored order.

It is known that some British warlords in sub-Roman Britain, such as Vortigern, had hired Saxon and Angles as mercenaries to fight against the Picts but details are lacking so the scale of this practice cannot be known with any certainty.

At Maes Garmon, Saxon and Picts were allied but we cannot know as to why this alliance came about.

The Sources

The Historian Constantius of Lyon – *Vita Sancti Germani* 480 AD.

The Roman historian, Constantius, wrote a biography of St. Germanus. He mentions several Roman officials who were in Britain at the time of this event and it is accepted that they did exist. It is possible that Constantius may have interviewed individuals who were involved in the battle though some historians argue against this. The fact is, we can't prove or disprove this.

'By now the savage host of the enemy was close at hand and Germanus rapidly circulated an order that all should repeat in unison the call that he would give as a battle cry. Then, whilst the enemy were still secure in their belief that their approach was unexpected, the bishops, three times chanted the Alleluia. All, as one man repeated it, and the shout they raised rang through the air and was repeated many times in the confined space between the mountains.

The enemy were panic stricken, thinking that the very rocks and sky itself were falling on them. Such was their terror that no effort of their feet seemed to save them. They fled in every direction, throwing away their weapons and thankful that they could at least save their skins. Many threw themselves into the river which they had just crossed at their ease and drowned within it.

Thus, the British army looked on at its revenge without striking a blow, idle spectators of the victory achieved. The booty strung everywhere was collected, the pious soldiery obtained the spoils of victory from heaven. The bishops were elated at the route of the enemy without bloodshed and a victory gained by faith and not by force'.

The Saxon – The Venerable Bede.

Bede recorded the below. (The greater chronicle).

Having gathered some men, they checked the campaign of the Saxons [...] the enemy was forced to flee panic-stricken, not by the noise of the tuba but by the crying of Alleluia by the voice of the whole army raised to the stars.

Bede would be more specific when he recorded in his *Ecclesiastical History* (book I, chapter 20), of a small British force who were greatly outnumbered by the armies of the Saxons and the Picts. Among the Britons there were three priests who proposed to the British army to loudly shout 'Alleluia'. As the whole army shouted the word simultaneously (and the word resounded through the entire valley), the pagans became afraid the heavens might fall down on their heads and so they ran away.

Bede gives a short description about the battlefield stating that it took place in a high sided valley through which a river flowed.

Nennius - *Historia Brittonum*.

The Briton Nennius confirms that Germanus was in the country but concentrates on his dealings with the warlord Vortigern. I will not go into the details in this article but Vortigern is said to have married his daughter and had a child by her, a complete anathema to the Church, which brought him into conflict with Germanus and the Pope.

Gildas - British monk - *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*

Gildas's history 'The overthrow and conquest of Britain is concerned with the collapse of Roman order in Britain and he then relates the history of conflict. He is our main source for Aurelius Ambrosius and the defeat of the Saxons at the battle of Mons Badonicus, under the British warlord, Arthur. A complex history, but he too, confirms the presence of Germanus in Britain.

Conclusions

Given the written evidential material, we can be sure that Germanus was in Britain in or around 430 AD. It is also believable that he led a Romano British army to victory against a combined force of Saxons and Picts.

The real issue here is the description of the battlefield. Bede and Constantius state that it took place in a high sided valley through which a river flowed. This certainly does not fit with the topography of the field of St. Germanus, just outside of Mold, but legend and tradition can often be at odds, so we cannot dismiss the site.

In 1833, workmen found this at the site of the 'Goblin's well' on the field of St. Germanus. It's a gold cape but has nothing to do with the battle of Maes Garmon and it dates from the bronze age. It was excavated from the site of an ancient burial mound and is now displayed in the British Museum.



THE MOLD GOLD CAPE – BRONZE AGE.

No battlefield archaeology has taken place on the site which is the usual case for virtually all British battlefields and this is why that most of our ancient battlefield sites remain unknown.

Personally, I think if you believe Bede's description of the battlefield, then you will not accept the Mold site. High sided valleys with rivers running through them abound in Wales. I've always thought that the Llangollen Valley below Castell Din Bran or even the Vale Crucis valley could be possible candidates, but again it's a personal opinion, unsupported by any quantifiable evidence.

Nonetheless, a battle took place. The Romano-British blew their war trumpets and shouted Alleluia three times and the enemy ran away. Not likely and invariably a lot of killing took place. From Constantius's description of an easy victory, did the British execute an ambush which overwhelmed the Saxons and Picts, slaughtering them whilst suffering few casualties of their own? Who knows? However, you could not allow an intact enemy force to roam your lands so they would have been pursued and slaughtered.

We have no figures for the size of either army, other than the Saxons and Picts outnumbered the Romano-British and we cannot know the number of casualties that each side suffered.

Another question is, why would two Bishops lead an army?

It's possible, even likely that both Germanus and Lupus, as noble Romans had likely served in the military though this cannot be confirmed. There is some belief, though not accepted by many historians, that Germanus had actually served in the Roman army as a General.

The Romano-British may have even had an experienced Romano-British warlord with them. The Romano-British troops would have looked and fought like late Roman soldiers and some may even have served in the Roman army.

This mysterious battle resonates in Welsh history and it should be remembered.

Though it is unlikely that we will ever discover more details about it, it is the basis for one of our legendary stories about the mysterious so called 'Dark Ages'.

Germanus died in Ravenna, Italy on the 31st of July 488. He was buried in the Abbey of Auxerre. He was later Canonised and became Saint Germanus. His tomb was desecrated by Huguenots in 1567.

Today the Welsh refer to him as St. Garmon and several churches bear his name.