**Green Open Access: pre-peer-review version (June 2021)**

Multi-disciplinary approaches to medieval Brittany, 450–1200: connections and disconnections

1. Introduction: Caroline Brett, Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell

Biographies of editors

Caroline Brett is Affiliated Lecturer in the Department of Anglo-Saxon,

Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. She was Research

Associate on the Leverhulme-funded project ‘Brittany and the Atlantic

Archipelago’ and has previously published an edition of two saints’ Lives

from Brittany.

Fiona Edmonds is Reader in History and Director of the Regional

Heritage Centre at Lancaster University. She is the author of *Gaelic*

*Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom: The Golden Age and the Viking*

*Age* (2019).

Paul Russell is Professor of Celtic in the Department of Anglo-Saxon,

Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge. His research interests

include Medieval Latin in the Celtic-speaking world, learned texts in

Celtic languages, Celtic philology and linguistics and medieval Welsh

law. He has recently published *Reading Ovid in Medieval Wales* (2017)

and *Vita Griffini filii Conani: The Medieval Latin Life of Gruffudd ap*

*Cynan* (2005), which won the 2004 Legonna Prize.

Caroline Brett est maître de conférences associée au Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic à l’Université de Cambridge. Elle fut associée de recherches de l’entreprise de recherche ‘Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago’ financié par le Leverhulme Trust et a publié une édition de deux Vies de saints provenant de Bretagne.

Fiona Edmonds est Reader en histoire et directeur du Regional Heritage Centre à l’Université de Lancaster. Elle est auteur de *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom: The Golden Age and the Viking Age* (2019).

Paul Russell est professeur en celtique au Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic à l’Université de Cambridge. Ses recherches englobent l’usage du latin dans le monde celtique médiéval, philologie et linguistique celtiques, et la loi médiévale du Pays de Galles. Il a publié *Reading Ovid in Medieval Wales* (2017) et *Vita Griffini filii Conani: The Medieval Latin Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* (2005): ce dernier ouvrage gagna le Prix Legonna en 2004.

Keywords: archaeology, interdisciplinarity, hagiography, language, names, territoriality

The history of Brittany, the north-western Atlantic peninsula of France, has always been hard to characterise in terms of the nation states and linguistic regions that make up modern Europe. Brittany’s prehistoric archaeology shows it to have been a zone of high connectivity with the islands beyond and with other Atlantic-facing coasts of Europe. Yet within the centralised states that have incorporated it in historic times – from the Roman Empire to modern France – it has often seemed remote. Compared to England and metropolitan France, it generated little written source-material until the modern era. (Original sources produced in Brittany itself before the year 1100 are limited to saints’ lives and two valuable, but geographically circumscribed, collections of charters.) The temptation for historians of the Middle Ages has often been either to leave Brittany on one side, or to write its history by analogy, assuming its general parity with one or other of the zones it bridged: Celtic Britain or continental France. Our title emphasises ‘disconnections’ as well as ‘connections’ to indicate the need to move beyond such assumptions, to be prepared to discard our models, and to return regularly to what the sources, limited as they are, can actually tell us.

It is easier to ask than to answer questions about Brittany and its origins. How did it acquire its British Celtic language, place-names and saints’ legends? Did this occur in a sudden spate of turmoil following the fall of Rome, or in a long-term process of osmosis? At what point did its Continental connections come to predominate over its Insular heritage in politics, social organisation and culture? Or are these questions simply the wrong ones to be asking, harking back to a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century template of scholarship that obscures as much as it reveals?

Brittany offers the opportunity to write a different kind of early medieval history, relieved of the hindsight imposed by seeking for the ‘origins’ of nations or kingdoms: the history of an area that was geographically well defined, yet often politically amorphous, receiving a multiplicity of influences but seldom dominated for long by any one neighbour: a hybrid society that was in some respects unique.

The wish to study this region in greater depth, in the context of recent developments in medieval studies, prompted the editors of this volume to apply for Leverhulme Trust funding for a four-year project at the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, Cambridge, between 2015 and 2019. The main outputs of the project are a monograph, *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago, 450­–1200: Contact, Myth and History*, to be published by Cambridge University Press in 2021, and the present volume, consisting of the papers presented at a conference held in Cambridge on 1–2 December, 2017. The leading theme of the monograph is the interplay between Brittany’s actual, evolving relationship with the Insular world, and Bretons’ developing ideas about their history and identity. Various kinds of source-material are used including language, archaeology and manuscripts, but the principal connecting thread is historical and the discussion is dominated by the representation of Brittany and its inhabitants in literary texts. The intention in organising the conference was to widen the perspective of the project by bringing together a variety of disciplinary expertise. As well as historians, we invited archaeologists, scholars of language, personal names and place-names, literary history and prosopography, in the hope that directions for future research would emerge. Some of the contributors were long-term specialists in Brittany, others approached it from a wider background in Celtic or early medieval studies: these variations in focus helped to build up a multi-layered picture with a wealth of spatial and inter-disciplinary connections.

To take archaeology first, the contributions by Patrick Galliou and John Hines focus on updating the interpretation of Brittany’s scanty late antique and early medieval archaeological record in the light of wider developments in the archaeology of the ‘migration period’ in Europe. Galliou dissects the archaeological underpinning of the theory, originally derived from medieval literary sources, that the British settlement of Brittany was a military movement organised by Roman authorities in the third and fourth centuries. Hines suggests that Brittany, usually overlooked during discussions of early medieval population movements, should rather be seen as a central test case for such movements and their impact, focusing on the deliberate creation of new political entities rather than the simple transfer of archaeological assemblages. The rather emphatic severing of one kind of postulated connection between Britain and Brittany in these papers paves the way for the contribution by Isabelle Catteddu and Joseph Le Gall, which widens the focus from the search for evidence of migration to investigation of settlement and society more generally. Drawing on a wealth of new evidence from developer-led archaeology, Catteddu and Le Gall demonstrate that early medieval Breton material culture, while appearing relatively modest, contains great diversity and reveals multiple, sometimes unexpected, external connections. All these papers add scope and detail, and the authority of their authors’ long experience in primary research, to the necessarily rather general treatment of archaeological evidence in the monograph.

The historical contributions by Magali Coumert, Joëlle Quaghebeur and Katharine Keats-Rohan likewise touch on issues treated in the monograph, but with added detail grounded in their individual specialisms. They too perform the complementary tasks of questioning anachronistic assumptions and introducing new perspectives. Magali Coumert’s paper is inspired by her interest in epistemology and the weight of inherited assumptions in the writing of Breton history, and also reflects the current interest among French medieval historians in territoriality and its comparative lack of definition in the early Middle Ages. Re-examining the contemporary source-material of the sixth and early seventh centuries, she points out that, shorn of the retrospective view imposed by sources of the Carolingian period and after, the existence of ‘Brittany’ as a unit – combining a political territory, a language and an ethnic group, *Brittones* or Bretons – cannot be substantiated before *ca* 800. Joëlle Quaghebeur has done more than any other researcher to elucidate the little-known political history of western Brittany from the Carolingian period to the central Middle Ages. With her paper we move forward to the Viking Age when Brittany’s belatedly created territorial integrity threatened to fall apart, and the region was temporarily an important counter in the post-Carolingian configuration of north-west Europe. The installation of the Breton duke Alan II by the English king Æthelstan has long been known as a historic episode, but is here framed in the broader context of connections between the courts of Francia, Wessex and Wales in the 930s as rulers attempted to contain the Vikings. Katharine Keats-Rohan is known for her authoritative work on the prosopography of England after 1066 and especially on the role of Bretons in what she has termed the ‘non-Norman Conquest’. Her paper also pivots on the Viking Age and on the period of ecclesiastical reform and reconstruction that followed. Using the narrative and commemorative records of the monastery of Mont-Saint-Michel on the Breton/Norman border as a point of departure, she shows that eastern Brittany in the tenth and eleventh centuries was part of a continuum of reformist initiatives that stretched from Burgundy through Lotharingia, Flanders, Neustria and beyond: regardless of political fragmentation, here was an intimate web of connections that counterbalances the idea of a beleaguered Brittany in the decades preceding the Gregorian reform.

‘Disconnection’ and reconnection likewise characterise the three contributions that are aimed at placing Brittany’s heritage of early medieval Latin hagiography in its Insular and Continental context. These are the contributions that are closest in subject-matter to the monograph, but they offer a complementary perspective and differ from it in some details of interpretation. Joseph-Claude Poulin, from a position of unparalleled expertise in the textual history of Breton saints’ Lives, points out the ways in which it is *not* meaningful to categorise these texts as ‘Celtic’: most of their tropes and stylistic traits were also popular in the Frankish realms and in the Western Church in general. Meanwhile, the evidence assembled by Karen Jankulak in her survey of ‘Cross-Channel Intercourse in the Earliest Breton *Vitae*’ – likewise drawing on a wealth of experience in the reconstruction of Brittonic saints’ cults – makes it clear that although the Breton Lives of the ninth century and earlier are not strongly similar in style to the earliest, seventh-century Irish hagiography, nevertheless ‘we need to appreciate the story they tell of regular, if not continuous, intellectual exchanges [between the Celtic-speaking regions] across the later first millennium’. Ben Guy, whose recent work has revolutionised the understanding of medieval Welsh genealogy, focuses his study more closely on the hagiography and genealogy emanating from the monastery of Llancarfan in Gwent in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. He demonstrates how its literati, prompted by the proximity of Breton settlers at Monmouth after the Norman Conquest, experimented with successive theories about the foundation of Brittany that culminated in the overwhelmingly successful inventions of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

These contributions show how a simultaneously long and short focus, placing texts under the microscope of close reading while also broadening the context in which they are read, can elicit substantial new understanding from material that has long been familiar to scholarship. The search for historical insights from linguistic and onomastic material from Brittany, by comparison, has received less attention since the pioneering work of K. H. Jackson, with exceptions such as the place-name studies of the late Professor Bernard Tanguy. This lends special importance to the two contributions to this volume by linguists: Oliver Padel, the acknowledged expert on Cornish place-names, and Paul Russell, who specialises in the language interface between Latin and British in the early Middle Ages. Padel’s essay is an exploratory comparison of a range of sacred and secular place-name elements in Brittany, Cornwall and Wales, which concludes that the variation in usage points to real and intriguing social and administrative differences between these regions. Paul Russell’s similarly broad survey of the development of personal names in early medieval Brittany includes a comparison with Welsh and Cornish names and makes important methodological points about the role of semantic meaning, fashion and social change in their evolution. Further study in this field may clarify the similarities and differences between Brittany and other Insular and Continental societies in the significance of names, clarifying how they may be used in the kind of reconstruction of familial and social relationships that forms the substance of regional medieval studies in many parts of France.

The study of language and names, alongside archaeology and possibly genetics, holds out the promise of adding substantially to the knowledge base on early medieval Brittany. So does the study of manuscripts and their contents – texts, script and glosses – together with inscriptions. The work of the ‘Ireland and Carolingian Brittany: Texts and Transmission’ (IRCABRITT) project at NUI Galway is making great progress in this field and we regretted that we were unable to include a paper focusing specifically on manuscript studies in this volume. All these disciplines offer the possibility of mitigating one of the greatest problems in the early history of Brittany, the chronologically discontinuous coverage of the source-material. A problem that our series of papers could not altogether avoid, on account of their varied subject matter, was the tendency to focus attention on the separate periods for which source-material does exist, or for which compelling problems present themselves – the post-Roman period, the ninth century, the ‘Viking crisis’, and the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Inevitably it is difficult to tackle the lengthy blanks in between, and this in turn obscures questions of longer-term historical development. Only certain papers, for instance the language papers and those by Catteddu, Keats-Rohan and Jankulak, had the opportunity to take a more longitudinal view, an approach which we hope to see continued in future work. Some informed guesses, at least, on what transpired in Brittany during the evidentiary blank of the mid-seventh to eighth centuries, are overdue, as is a reassessment of the transition from Carolingian Brittany, with its unusual, independent village communities (so vividly elucidated by Wendy Davies), to eleventh-century Brittany with its typically northern French knightly aristocracy and dependent peasantry. More generally, a true *longue durée* approach that makes full use of various disciplines will allow Brittany to emerge as an important indicator, on a European scale, of the slow shifts between centralisation and decentralisation of power, between land-based and maritime economic systems, that determined whether it was pulled towards the Continent or faced the sea. Barry Cunliffe’s extensive scholarship is notable for a *longue durée* approach to these questions, as seen most recently in his book *Bretons and Britons: The Fight for Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2021). The wide variety of disciplines and the detailed case studies encompassed in this volume have additional insights to contribute.

We offer this collection of essays in the hope of setting Brittany closer to the centre of early medieval studies: neither an anomaly that needs specialised treatment in an airtight ‘Celtic’ chamber, nor a remote but typical region to which historical models developed elsewhere can be mechanically applied, but an example, to be set alongside others, of the sheer variety of social adaptations that arose in response to the general conditions of the early medieval world – political shrinkage, economic abatement, the sacralisation of space. We hope, too, that scholars working on this field in a variety of languages will continue to collaborate and to learn from one another’s approaches – inspired by those often anonymous medieval pioneers who forged those connections which we now study.