

## OROSIUS'S *ORMESTA* AND JOHN CAPGRAVE

ELETE WITH QUAIN AND SOMETIMES BIZARRE LEARNING, *Abbreuiacion of Cronicles* by John Capgrave (1393–1464) owes many details to its compiler (Gray 2008: 167–168). Discussing late antiquity, he says for example that Orosius, “messagere betwix Jerom and Augustin,” wrote “a book onto Seynt Augustin: it is clepid *Ormesta Mundi*.” Capgrave’s editor notes that the title is not in Capgrave’s source, by Martinus Polonus or Marcin z Oprawy (c. 1208–1278/9); identifies Orosius’s work as *Historia adversus Paganos* and dates it to 417; and explains *Ormesta Mundi* as perhaps from *Or[osii] m[undi] ist[ori]a* (+*Mundi*), the last word repeated in error (Lucas 1983: 65, 266, 396).

This etymology is not credible. *Ormesta*, used of works by Orosius in the fifth century and Gildas in the sixth, is not a dubious Latin acronym but Breton, or Breton Latin. Yet, as authorities disagree on its origin, a fresh account is needed. It begins with a ninth-century Latin life of St Pol (first bishop of Léon in Brittany) by the Breton monk Wrmonoc, who remarked that Gildas in a book “which they call *Ormesta Britanniae*” wrote *de ipsius insulae situ atque miseriis* (we shall return to those “miseris”). *Ormesta* here was explained by Cuissard in 1883 as from a Breton cognate of Welsh *gormes* “oppression,” with *-ta* perhaps “added to Latinize the word,” a view accepted by later scholars (Williams 1899–1901: 319, 417). Another approach was, however, initiated by Sir Ifor Williams, in relating early Welsh *armes* “prophecy, prediction; calamity, tribulation, loss” to Middle Irish *airdmes* “act of calculating; estimate, opinion” (Williams 1922–1924: 23–36).

Two derivations are the result. One takes early Irish *forbas*, *forbais*, *forfess* “oppression, siege,” Welsh *gormes* “oppression,” and Old-Breton Latin *ormesta* “misery” as of the same origin (Pedersen & Lewis 1937: 47). In flat contradiction is the other, that *Ormesta*

*Britanniae* (another name for *De excidio Britanniae*) contains a Breton cognate of Middle Irish *airdmes* “act of calculating; estimate” and Welsh *armes* “prophecy; calamity, loss” (*GPC s.v.*). It is certainly not strange that Orosius’s book should have a Breton name. Like Gildas, he was read in Breton schools, and several manuscripts of him have Old Breton glosses (Jackson 1953: 62, 65). As for his subject, this was brilliantly summed up in a passage too long to quote in full, but beginning “Orosius taught, as no other historian, that the past was horrible,” and continuing, “he holds that humanity always did suffer and always will; that the condition of its existence is war, plague, famine, and fire;” and that “the human tragedy can only be seen for what it is if we discard the notion of an ideal and heroic past” (Wallace-Hadrill 1971: 145). No surprise, then, if *Ormesta mundi* as a title for his history in a manuscript from Fleury (near Orleans) should parallel that of *De miseria hominum* elsewhere. Ifor Williams cited the last, as also Wrmonoc on Gildas as writing *de ipsius insulae situ atque miseriis*, as evidence that *Ormesta* is from the Breton cognate, not of Welsh *gormes* “oppression by an alien race or conqueror, tyranny, violence; encroachment, intrusion, attack,” but of Welsh *armes* “prophecy; calamity, tribulation.” The senses “calamity, tribulation” go better with *miseria* than does that of “oppression by aliens” (Williams 1972: xlv–ix). Yet medieval Latinists take no notice. Although citing *ormesta* as a title for Gildas’s work in Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS 25, and as one for Orosius’s in texts by Ordericus Vitalis, Roger Bacon, and Ranulf Higden, they still derive *ormesta* from a Old Breton cognate of Welsh *gormes* (Howlett 2003). They repeat what Cuissard proposed back in 1883.

So we say again that, while Welsh *gormes* “oppression by aliens” does not suit Orosius’s polemical intent, Welsh *armes* “tribulation” does. After Romans blamed Christians for the Empire’s fall, Orosius wrote to show how disaster had ever been, even in the good old days of paganism. That is why one Breton called his catalogue of woe *Ormesta mundi* “calamity of the world,” when another referred

to Gildas's treatise *de ipsius insulae situ atque miseriis* as *de Ormesta Britanniae* "calamity of Britain." The use of Celtic-Latin *Ormesta* for Orosius's book is not remarkable. He was known to Britons and Bretons alike. This writer has shown that (even though Anglo-Saxonists pass it over) a Cornishman dictated the Old English *Orosius* to a West Saxon scribe (Breeze 2007: 367–368, Godden & Irvine 2009: 5, 136–137). Orosius was read too in Wales, where one bard embellished his verses with Orosian place-names in regions from Turkey to Bangladesh (Haycock 2007: 409). The Celtic aspects of Orosius's *Ormesta* are hence clear, just as they are for Gildas (here owing much to the prophet Jeremiah; George 2009: 20–25). When, therefore, Capgrave referred to *Ormesta mundi*, he cited a Breton-Latin form meaning "calamity of the world," not "oppression of the world;" and certainly not *Or[osii] m[undi] ist[ori]a* (+*Mundi*).

Andrew BREEZE

University of Navarre, Pamplona

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