



Brett, C., with F. Edmonds and P. Russell: *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago, 450–1200: Contact, Myth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2022. xvi + 479 pp. ISBN: 9781108486514. £90.

This new book is one of the most significant studies of early and high medieval Brittany to appear in English. It will immediately establish itself as the first work to consult on all the scholarly debates which it covers, for anglophone scholars at least. This is because it subsumes a huge body of previous scholarship, in French fully as much as in English, reaching from the nineteenth-century beginnings of modern historical and literary studies down to as yet unpublished work by contemporaries. To all of this scholarship it provides a thorough guide through its rich but businesslike footnotes and nearly a hundred pages of cited works. *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago* is, however, much more than a gigantic annotated bibliography. Like Caroline Brett's previous, shorter studies (1989, 2011), it presents a strongly argued opinion on the nature of cultural activity in early medieval Brittany. Most of the book is by Brett, but parts of the historical account were contributed by Fiona Edmonds, and the discussion of the Breton language is by Paul Russell (see p. viii for the division of labour; for clarity, it would have been preferable to mark the individual authors' names over the precise sections that they contributed).

This book is not a general history of Brittany in the early Middle Ages. Beyond a survey of archaeological evidence focused on the immediate post-Roman period (Chapter 1, 'Archaeology and the origins of Brittany'), there is little here about production, trade or the economy in general, or about the material basis of life—settlements, dwellings or the exploitation of the landscape. Inevitably, as a consequence, the greater part of the population features little here. The book is somewhat fuller on political history, but only as a necessary adjunct to the main, cultural narrative. All of these issues, and others, are due to be covered in a companion volume, multi-authored and thus decentred by comparison (pp. viii–ix, 370); this should provide an interesting complement to the present volume, which is, notwithstanding the contributions by Edmonds and Russell, very much rooted in Brett's previous work.

Instead, *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago* is a study of cultural links between Brittany, Britain and Ireland, primarily as reflected in literary works, though also in broader phenomena such as place-names and saints' cults. This means that it focuses, for the most part, on the self-presentation of the elite, and especially clerical and monastic authors, and on the large questions of origins that are peculiar to Brittany: how much of its cultural heritage is owed to the Insular world, and how exactly did a part of northern Gaul end up defining itself, and

being defined by outsiders, as ‘British’? Individual sections of the book cover the main topics: the nature of the Breton migrations, the origins of the Breton language (by Paul Russell), the distinctive place-names of Brittany and, above all, its cultural, political and ecclesiastical links with Wales, Cornwall and, to a lesser extent, Ireland, over the centuries. The book, it should be added, does not ignore links with England or Francia, but the main focus is precisely on those topics that have defined Brittany’s ambivalent interface with ‘Celtic Studies’ from the nineteenth century down to the present day. The subtitle, ‘Contact, myth and history’, addresses not only the problem of whether Brittany was ever really a member of a larger Brittonic-speaking world but how long such a situation can be said to have lasted and how generations of Breton commentators looked back on its origins from an increasingly distant perspective. As is now standard in approaches to historic identities, ideas of an immutable shared inheritance—what might be called ‘Celticity’—have been abandoned. Instead, identity is seen as being fashioned by people in a process that continues in every generation, as they select cultural markers from a range of options that are available to them. The historian therefore looks for concrete instances of cultural borrowing through identifiable channels of communication and, preferably, identifiable individual acts of cultural creation and appropriation. It is reasonable to posit that such exchanges with Insular Britain must have been most intense during the founding phase of Breton history, less so as time went on and the effects of geographical separation and political developments elsewhere made the two sides increasingly foreign to each other. It is a strength of this book that it maintains a rigorous focus on chronology and does not elide Breton origins with the subsequent development of identities over the nearly ten centuries that it surveys.

Nevertheless, origins are crucial and are explored in depth. The questions raised here have a long history and have proved extremely difficult to resolve. Over a century of argument has not brought much enlightenment, though it may have winnowed away some poorly supported answers that were popular once upon a time. The nature of the Breton migration remains difficult to grasp, along with the establishment of the Breton language, the creation and enduring significance of saints’ cults shared across the Channel, and the interpretation of Brittany’s peculiar place-names and its distinctive local communities, the *plous*, which do not look quite like anything found in Wales or Cornwall. It may be the case that the surviving evidence is simply not sufficient to answer any of these questions. No contemporary source clearly describes the processes by which Brittany came into existence, and the hints in Gildas and other fifth- and sixth-century writers come nowhere close to giving a coherent picture.

The book makes the important point that the creation of Brittany was an extraordinary, unprecedented event. It rejects the idea that Breton origins should be understood in the context of the long-term communication between the Atlantic regions that is visible in prehistory. Instead, it is argued that the Roman

empire profoundly redirected trade, wealth and power away from the Atlantic coasts and towards south-eastern Britain, northern France and the Rhineland, where they have remained (almost) ever since, leaving both western Britain and Brittany as comparative backwaters. The exception was the couple of centuries between *c.* 400 and *c.* 600, when the empire disintegrated and the Britons were freed to govern their own fate, for a short while. The favourable circumstances that allowed the Britons to extend their cultural reach did not last long, which brings the implication that the continued 'British' identity of Brittany was not a given after 600, and especially not after the Carolingian recovery that began around the middle of the eighth century: in fact, its maintenance went against the grain of political and economic power, which pulled Breton attention inexorably eastwards towards the Frankish, European heartland. A Breton or 'British' identity obviously had a deep reservoir of support in the Breton language that had largely replaced Romance across the bulk of the peninsula, but for Breton elites, continuing to emphasize their origins in Britain was a matter of conscious choice that must have taken some effort to keep up.

On the vexed issue of the migration itself, the most noteworthy point is that Brett seems to have softened her opposition to the 'soldiers' hypothesis, that is, the idea that Brittany was settled by British soldiers and that it was ceded to them in some fashion by the Roman state or someone acting in its name. Her 2011 article, 'Soldiers, Saints and Settlements: The Breton Migrations Revisited', was very sceptical of the whole idea, but here she notes that 'its strength lies in general probability' (p. 73). I wonder if this is in part a reaction to Guy (2014), in which the migrants were seen as low-status, rural dwellers fleeing unsettled conditions in southern Britain. It is difficult for Guy's hypothesis to account for how such refugees could not only take possession of a large territory but decisively change its spoken language and its very name, and here Brett notes the need both for 'military capability' and the legitimacy conferred by 'an official concession or act of formal approval' (p. 73). Given that our sources themselves indicate the presence of at least one large British army operating elsewhere in Gaul in the late fifth century, the capacity of British military rulers to raise and lead a force capable of controlling a tract of northern Gaul need not be in doubt. Somehow, over the half century or so after 410, the civilian population of the Roman diocese seems not only to have been militarized, but to have become reasonably good warriors, an idea that incidentally is supported by Gildas's account of the same period.

The view of early medieval Brittany suggested in this book is in other regards similar to that of Brett's articles of 1989 and 2011. As late as the later ninth century at least, the region shows 'a state of society noticeably different from that of Brittany's neighbours in either Gaul or Britain, more decentralised, with weaker elites' (p. 64). There was no powerful aristocratic class, and kings, where present at all, did not rule intensively; similarly, there were few large, rich or

powerful churches and monasteries, but instead lots of small local ones. Brittany was largely a land of peasant proprietors, hard to tax and exploit (pp. 90–91). The upshot of this is that there was not much production of the kind of culture that has a chance of surviving down to today, whether it be monumental buildings, works of sculpture or literary texts. On the other hand, Brittany was probably one of the least bad parts of Europe in which to be a peasant, since you would rarely be compelled to pay for such cultural production, or for other activities such as warfare, by a rapacious and competitive elite—a thought that perhaps should occur more often to those of us who occupy ourselves with the thoroughly aristocratically minded vernacular literatures of medieval Wales or Ireland. It is not clear to what extent this picture is self-reinforcing—lack of texts suggesting absence of the kind of power structures which we can only know about from texts—but analysis of the ninth-century records from Redon does suggest that local peasant communities were unusually free of lords and their exactions. By the twelfth century this had undoubtedly given way to the same kind of picture that we see elsewhere in northern France, where a powerful aristocracy exploited a heavily burdened peasantry, but by that time the cultural orientation of the elite had turned decisively away from Britain and towards *la francophonie*. For Brett, this history can account for the lack of a written Breton literature in these centuries: at first, there was no basis of patronage, and by the time the potential patrons for a Breton literature were rich enough to afford it, they had fallen under the influence of French-speaking aristocratic society and could not envisage Breton as the language of a courtly culture.

Though Brett is scrupulous in discussing the possibility that more literature was produced than survives, and especially the likelihood that there was an oral culture that we can barely perceive at all, the picture is still strongly drawn along the contours of the surviving written evidence, in all its patchiness and haphazardness. Latin hagiography is the chief kind of literature that survives from medieval Brittany and this book is rich in discussions of it. A lot of important new work has been done on saints' Lives in recent years, in all of the regions concerned, including England and Francia, and Brett presents an important *status quaestionis*. Breton hagiography has been the victim of a tug-of-war between those who want, often for nationalistic reasons, to emphasize its links to the Insular world, and those, arguably for equally nationalistic reasons, who insist that it is wholly comparable to the hagiography of the rest of Carolingian and post-Carolingian Francia. Brett lays a judicious hand on the Insular end of the rope by pointing out that, although Breton hagiographical culture was obviously integrated with wider Frankish and western European trends, nevertheless Breton authors chose consistently to look to the Insular Britons for the origins of their patron saints and their churches, and this required a certain degree of contact with Insular hagiography, contact that had to be sought out and maintained by choice as it did not follow the natural routeways of trade or power. This was

particularly true after the migration period drew to a close and even more so as Brittany turned politically towards the Carolingian world. As a result, Brett sees the contact between Bretons and Insular churches from the ninth century onwards as limited, occasional and not marked by profound mutual interest. Only the earliest Breton Life, the pre-Carolingian *Vita I Sancti Samsonis* of the late seventh century, shows intense contact with and a degree of personal knowledge of Wales and Cornwall on the part of the Breton author. By the time that we reach the hagiographers Bili, Wrdisten and Wrmonoc in the second half of the ninth century, knowledge of each side by the other was quite limited. The Welsh knew little of Brittany and it formed only a small dot on their geographical horizons. Breton interest in Wales and Cornwall was more consistent and focused, but still rather sporadic and fragmentary: ‘the stories consciously preserved by Bretons (and their neighbours) about their British past are thin and disappointing compared to the weight of the evidence of language, place-names, script and cult’ (p. 339).

This pessimistic view of mutual knowledge in the centuries after the Breton migration perhaps shows the need to manage our expectations. Medieval people lacked the kind of knowledge networks that we take for granted. It is doubtful whether most medieval Welsh people knew about saints even in other parts of Wales, let alone far away overseas. To take one example: the author of the hagiographical-genealogical tract *Bonedd y Saint* (on which Brett has important commentary in this book) seems to have had quite haphazard access to information from south Wales. One of the few southern saints that he included was the very important St Cadog, but he is described as ‘of Llangattock in Gwent’, with no mention of his vastly more prominent church of Llancarfan (which also plays a starring role in this book). This—and I am speculating quite boldly here—was probably because the author’s own church of Clynnog Fawr had an entrée to the south-east borderlands of Wales through Llanveynoe or Caerwent, but no contacts in Glamorgan. If the author of *Bonedd y Saint* was not in touch with Llancarfan, then that puts the achievement of Breton hagiographers into some context, for they most certainly were, as can be seen in the hagiography from ninth-century Saint-Malo and eleventh-century Quimperlé. Or perhaps, if the author was working as late as the 1200s, then Llancarfan may have ceased to be an active centre of learning by his time. Along with the tyranny of distance, the fragility of individual institutions was a severe constraint on long-term cultural memory, as too was the weakness of medieval technologies for preserving information. Most saints probably never had a written *vita*. Knowledge of the person might last a few decades after their death, but after that, there was little hope for the retention of a pedigree or a backstory unless these were written down. Arguably, we should admire the industry of later writers who struggled so hard to fill these gaps, and not lament the gaps themselves. It is difficult to see how contact between Brittany and Wales or Cornwall could ever have been sufficient to retain a deep common pool of knowledge, still less a shared ethnic identity, over the ten centuries covered

in this book. Is it too much to suggest that the level of pan-Brittonic contact that we see represents the maximum that was possible in the circumstances, not the minimum, especially when we reflect on how much more evidence must have been lost?

I have lingered on hagiography, in which I have a personal interest, but I should note that *Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago* covers a wealth of other matters. There is a chapter on manuscripts; incidentally, the survival of some 200 manuscripts from early medieval Brittany represents about ten times what survives from Wales in the same period and puts ideas of Breton cultural poverty in perspective. As with early medieval Wales, the lack of safe, long-lasting libraries in Brittany means that we are very much dependent on more stable and secure churches in northern Francia and England for the survival of Breton manuscripts, and that is bound to limit what survives: essentially, books taken out of Brittany, for whatever reason, and which were written in a readable, i.e. Carolingian, script in Latin and contained texts of relevance to non-Bretons. Many Lives of Breton saints written in Latin after the mid-ninth century satisfy all these criteria; most other genres of original literature that might have been produced in Brittany are much less likely to have done so. The book also contains a valuable discussion of archaeological evidence which makes clear that this is an area in which knowledge is rapidly increasing (from a very low base, it must be said), and new insights are likely in the future. Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Arthurian legend have their natural place as well, along with Breton involvement in the Norman conquest, and much else besides.

Brittany and the Atlantic Archipelago is a landmark in the field and an essential book for all who are interested in medieval Brittany. It is written in a limpid, no-nonsense style that makes it consistently readable in spite of the denseness of some of the material. Though it is a *summa* of previous scholarship, it is also a highly personal and decisively argued view of medieval Brittany. It is likely to shape debate on the subject for many years to come, whether positively or through inciting others to come to different conclusions.

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