THE FRONTIER ZONE AND THE SIEGE OF MOUNT BADON: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE FOR THEIR LOCATION

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Introduction

The battle of Badon is acknowledged as an historic watershed during the period of the English conquest and settlement of Britain. The written sources suggest that the English over-reached themselves at Badon and the Welsh were able to stem the pagan advance westwards. A long-term partition of Britain ensued, lasting approximately 150 years, the beginning of which was recorded by Gildas. Placenames reflect the relative positions of the Welsh and English groups and we have reviewed those associated with the English colonisation with a view to locating the frontier zone as it existed between 500 AD and 650 AD.

Much of the contemporary material is Welsh and any attempt to analyse this period of history should take account of the Welsh as well as the English sources. This produces a more balanced picture than that which is formed solely from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which some have regarded as the sole objective source, and which largely post-dates the Welsh documents.

Britain was nominally Christian during the closing years of Roman rule and the Welsh remained so throughout the period under discussion. The Celtic Church was independent until the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD brought it into the Roman orbit, in line with the English, who, having received no Christian influence from the Welsh, remained pagan until after the papal mission of St. Augustine in 597 AD. The English of Wessex were converted in the years following 630 AD after which the establishment of religious foundations in the region ensued.

Sources

The main sources for a review of the period are:

GILDAS (a Welsh saint), who wrote his religious tract *The Ruin of Britain c.*550 AD. He describes how the English invaders overwhelmed the Welsh inhabitants until a period of recovery initiated by Ambrosius Aurelianus led to a massive defeat of the English at the siege of Badon Hill, followed by a period of peace. At this time the country was partitioned and we may imagine a situation of uneasy co-existence such as that between Jew and Arab in modern Israel. Gildas wrote in Latin.[1]

BEDE (an Englishman), who wrote his *History of the English people* in the years preceding 731 AD. He apparently used Gildas as a source when referring to Badon, of which he said 'I shall deal with this later'. Unfortunately he did not, or if he did the relevant part was edited out. He wrote in Latin.[2]

NENNIUS (a Welsh cleric), compiled his *British History* in about 830 AD. It consists of a collection of earlier texts, both English and Welsh, which he tried to assemble in chronological order. It contains valuable information relating to the Post-Roman period and catalogues the victories of the Welsh over the English, giving locations throughout Britain, some of which can be identified. The victory of Badon was the climax of the campaign which was recorded as having been led by Arthur. In our opinion undue attention has been paid to the personality and status of the battle leader by modern historians, and this has tended to obscure and devalue other contributions made by this and other texts. Nennius wrote in Latin.[3]

THE WELSH ANNALS, which record significant events from the western viewpoint. Some scholars assert that the early entries are derived from the Irish Annals. If this is so, it in no way reduces their validity, bearing in mind the high level of contact between Wales and Ireland during the era of the Celtic church and the literacy of their shared culture. They should be read in conjunction with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. By 600 AD the two documents were sometimes recording the same events and there is a close correlation between dates in the two texts. The Annals were written in Latin.[4]

THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE, which lists events seen from the perspective of the English and initially shows an eastern bias. It was compiled around 900 AD, but must have relied upon a vast body of earlier material both written and oral. Some places named in the *Chronicle* are difficult to identify, owing to the evolution of the English language and the problems faced by the individual scribes in producing an acceptable phonetic spelling. The *Chronicle* used Old English.[5]

THE DOMESDAY BOOK, which confirms some earlier place-name spellings. It was written in 1080 AD or thereabouts in the Latin of the Norman scribes.[6]

ECCLESIASTICAL CHARTERS, which indicate, *inter alia*, the foundation dates of English religious institutions and provide valuable evidence of land possession in the period following the conquest.

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH[7] and the MABINOGION.[8]

When reading both English and Welsh sources in conjunction, it becomes apparent that there were two if not three battles of Badon. The Welsh Annals tell us that the first battle, which is not reported in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, occurred in 516 AD. We cannot be sure of the infallibility of any early date source, but we can take that date as a pointer. Gildas says that the battle occurred in the year of his birth which was 44 years earlier. The Annals record his death in 570, which would make him 54 when he died, old enough to be accorded the title of 'wisest of Britons' which the Annals give him.

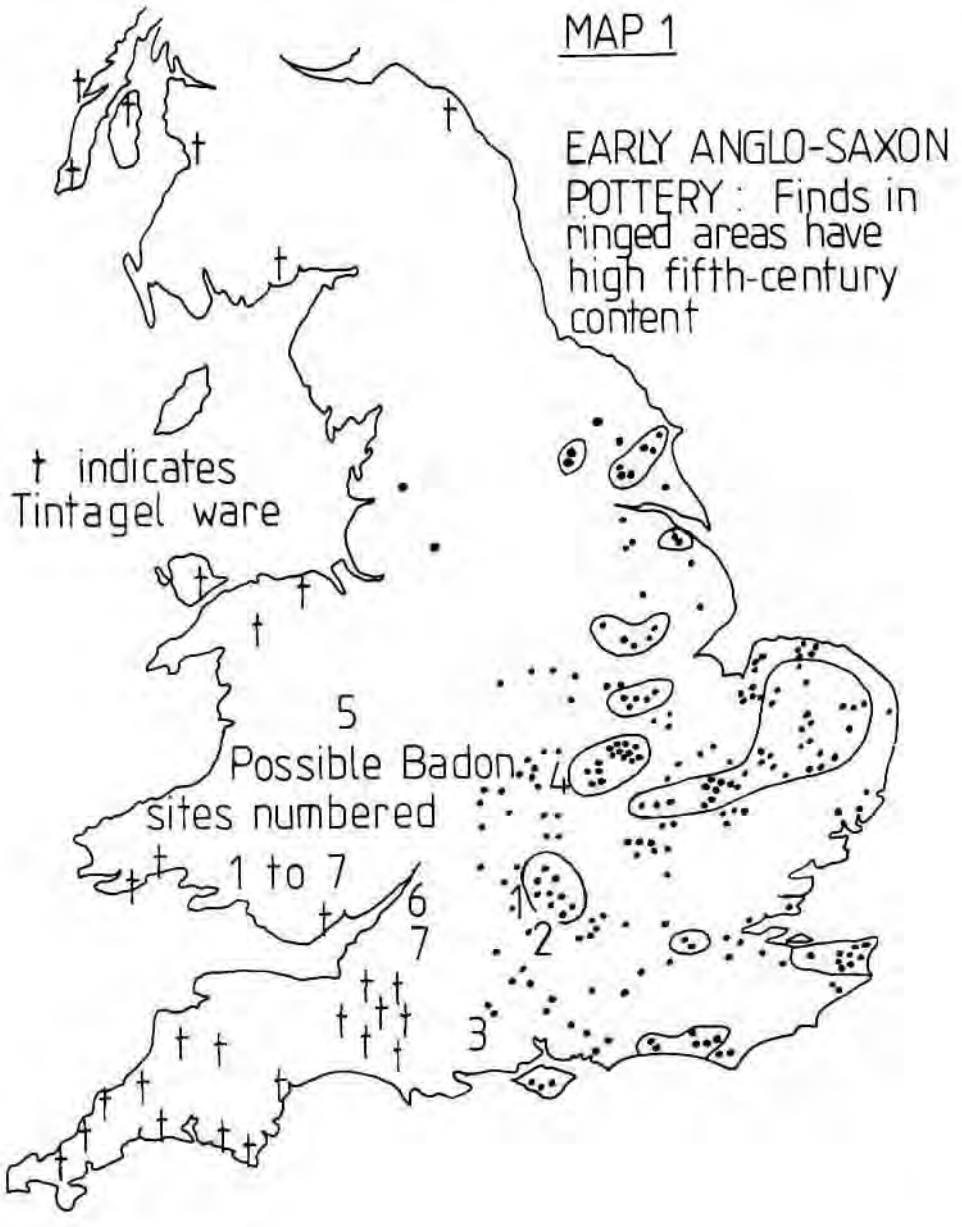
The second battle of Badon in 665 AD is also reported solely in the Welsh Annals and is therefore regarded as doubtful by some writers. However, events recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* confirm the location of the final push by English forces from Wiltshire to the Severn Estuary in the period 660 AD to 670 AD, which suggests that the battle could have occurred in this region. The military action was rapidly followed by the establishment of religious foundations at Bath in 675 AD, Frome in 685 AD and Glastonbury in 688 AD. It is clear that after 670 AD the lower Severn area was lost to the Welsh. The Annals report battle failures as well as successes and we see no reason to doubt that a second battle of Badon was part of this campaign.

The third battle, occurring between the dates of the two named Badons, is that of

Dyrham, which the Chronicle records for the year 577 AD. The site is a few miles north of Bath. During the battle the three cities of Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath were captured by the English and three Welsh kings were killed. This event is an indication of continuing tension in the area during the period of partition. There is no evidence of wholesale English colonisation of the area following this military success.

Location of Mount Badon

Scholars have long speculated on the site of the battle of *c.*516 AD. The most commonly mentioned possible locations are (see map 1):



1 Liddington Castle, Wiltshire (Badbury placename adjacent). An Iron Age hillfort, which has been proposed by virtue of its position in southern England and the existence of a local placename with the 'Bad' prefix.

2 Baydon near Lambourn, Berkshire. A site with similar credentials.

3 Badbury Rings near Wimborne, Dorset. Like Liddington Castle, it is another hillfort site with a plausible position and name.

4 Badby, Northants. A southern English site with the 'Bad' prefix.

5 Buttington, near Welshpool (suggested by other writers as a possible location for the battle of 665 AD).

6 We could add Baden Hill east of Thornbury, Avon on the same basis as the others; namely that it is in southern Britain in the area of possible conflict and appears to have a qualifying placename.

7 Bath in the county of Avon, the Caer Faddon of *The Mabinogian* and the location favoured by Geoffrey of Monmouth. At first sight it appears to have an unacceptable placename.

The modern historian's concentration on the prefix 'Bad' has undoubtedly narrowed our perspective of possible locations for the battle. A quick glance at the Domesday Book for Somerset will show that placename spellings were flexible and we should take into account the difficulties experienced by scribes in phonetically recording the names they heard. This produced inevitable variations of written forms.

To locate Badon and to confirm the position of the frontier zone we need to be able to place the English and the Welsh during the period of partition, which ended with the campaign which included Bradford-on-Avon in 652 AD (*ASC*) and the second battle of Badon in 665 AD (Welsh Annals). It is significant that Bath is six miles west of Bradford-on-Avon and was the next logical step in the westward sweep by the English towards the Severn.

The archaeological information which we can use to indicate the position of the English is of two types:

(a) Evidence which indicates the presence of the English immigrants by means of datable artefacts such as pottery or spearheads.

(b) The location of pagan cremation or inhumation burials. For a proper understanding of the developments in our specific area, a general background of the European evidence is required.

(a) *Artefacts*

The standard reference in this subject is Myres' *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery*[9] which compares the forms of cremation urns used in the colonised English territories with those in vogue in the German homelands and which shows close parallels between them. Map 1 shows a generalised distribution of datable Anglo-Saxon pottery based on a combination of information from Myres and a distribution of Tintagel ware from Dixon,[10] together with other sources. The Tintagel distribution indicates continuing trade between the Welsh of the unconquered west and the European Continent. The earliest English pre-500 AD finds are shown ringed. We do not offer a detailed analysis of the finds as this has been done ably by others and our aim is to use the detail already produced to achieve an overview. The distribution of artefacts recorded to date shows the heartlands of the two peoples during the 150 years of partition.

Recent research into the English homelands of the Danish/German border by

Zimmermann[11] indicates near total depopulation of that area during the 5th century. Abandoned settlements coincided with the reversion of once cultivated land to scrub. Whether this depopulation was the result of military pressures, climatic conditions, invitation from kinsfolk already established in Britain and elsewhere or a combination of these influences we cannot be certain, though it is clear that, for whatever reason, there was a huge impetus for the large-scale movement of people westwards away from the Continent and into Britain.

A recent article by Burgess[12] refers to a massive volcanic 'event' in or around 540 AD, (probably Mount Raiboul, New Guinea). The common result of such an incident is a 'little ice age' with consequent disruption of food production and probably famine and plague, events which may well have encouraged the movement of peoples from a densely populated part of the Continent in search of productive and more sparsely populated land. Burgess gives a population graph for Britain which indicates a reduction of more than 50 per cent in the years immediately following the eruption. This might explain why no significant land gains were made by the English for approximately 100 years, i.e. between the battles of Searoburh in 552 AD and Bradford-on-Avon in 652 AD.

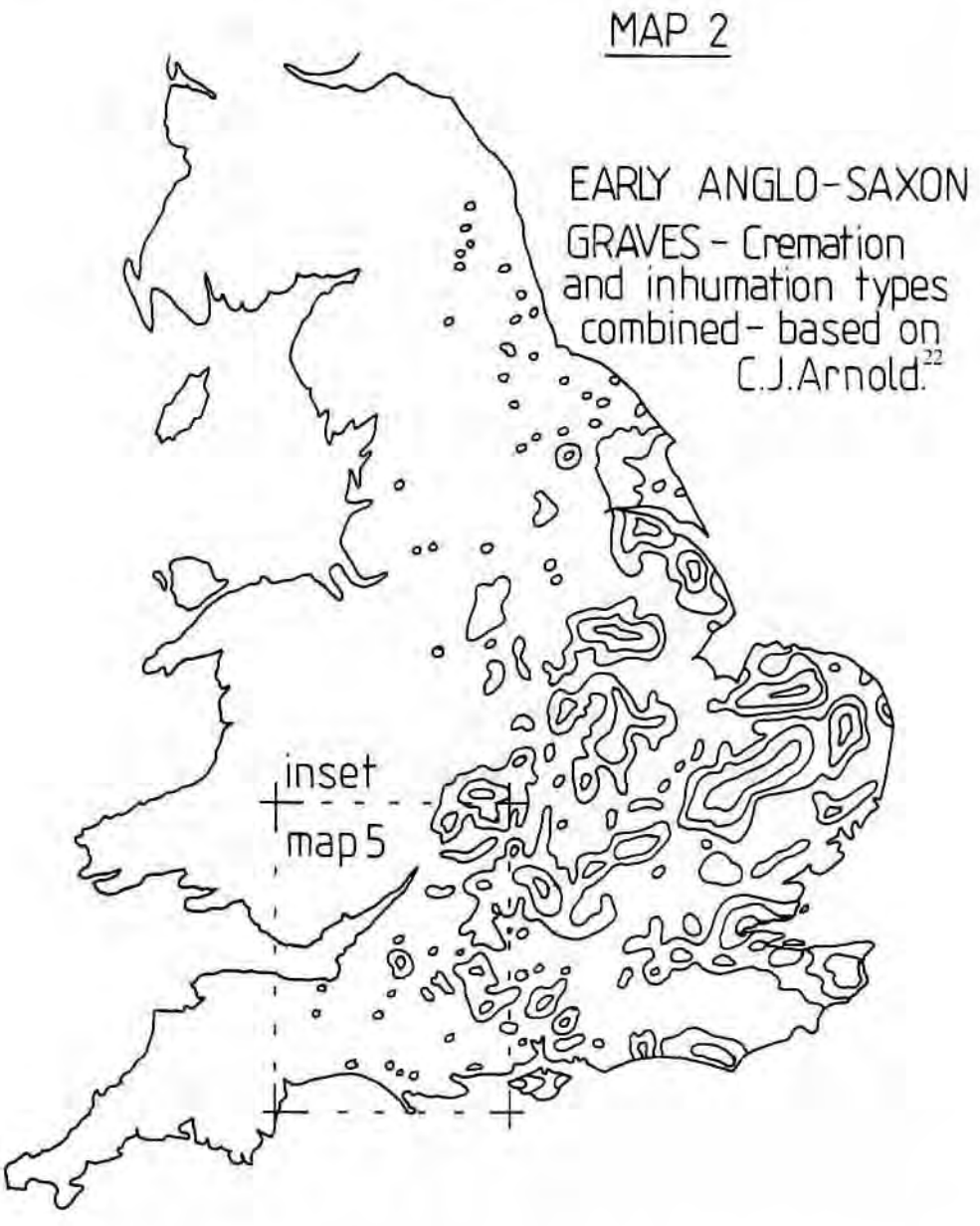
(b) *Pagan Burials*

Since much of the evidence in map 1 consists of funerary urns it is not surprising that the spread closely parallels map 2, which shows by contour Anglo-Saxon graves including inhumation as well as cremation. Distribution maps of amber and crystal beads, ivory rings and glass vessels are not given as they repeat the same general distribution.

From Swanton's studies of spearheads[13] one can see evidence of heavy concentrations of finds, dated before 550 AD, in the lower Severn valley and the Oxford area. These appear to confirm that colonisation during the pagan phase was occurring to the east of a line which roughly approximates to Southampton, Salisbury, Cirencester, Worcester, Leicester, Newark and York (map 3). The apparent concentration of early weapons of war in the lower Severn and upper Thames regions is particularly interesting, because of those areas' proximity to the Severn area of conflict, and indicates the possibility of a westward military expedition here by the English into Welsh territory, which may have culminated in the battle of Badon.

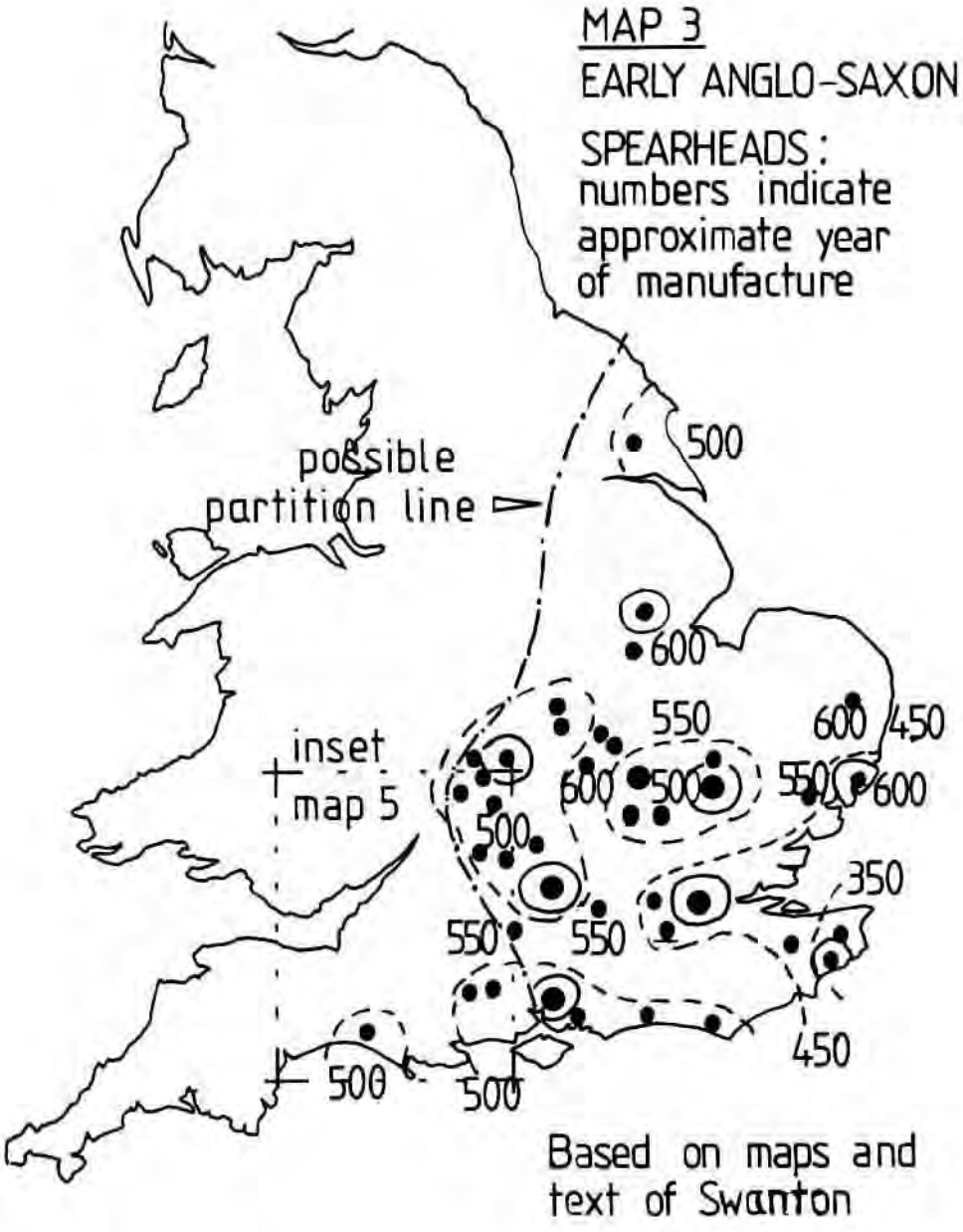
These indications of partition are repeated on a map of the distribution of early English placenames (map 4), compiled from a variety of sources including modern Ordance Survey sheets. It is apparent that English names have almost totally displaced Welsh east of the frontier, but west of the proposed line the survival of Welsh names becomes progressively concentrated.

In the context of the English/Welsh divide, it can be seen that some of the contended sites for Badon lie well within the earliest English settlement zone. Archaeological evidence shows that the east came under English control from an early date. This area would have presented a difficult military objective for the Welsh who were confined to the west of the country. Although it is not stated by sources other than Geoffrey of Monmouth who was besieging whom at Badon, it seems reasonable to suppose, as Geoffrey does, that the English were besieging a Welsh stronghold within an area of Welsh control and that the Welsh forces not only raised the siege but sent the English, defeated, back to their own established territories in the east. The English failure to invade the west in the years after Badon until 577 AD may be an indication of the severity of the defeat and a reluctance to risk assault during a period of plague and famine. The initial period of invasion by the English ceases and consolidation in the east takes its place.



Placenames

Placenames are an important source of information for this period. Conventional scholarship attributes the names ending in 'ing' to the earliest wave of Germanic settlers, but is less certain how to date 'ington' names. Examples of both types predominate in the east of the country and correspond with early settlement. The frequency reduces as one approaches the postulated frontier and to the west of it there are only a few 'ington' names, supported by sparse archaeological evidence, representing early English settlement. 'Ing' names are almost unknown in the west,



though Doulting near Shepton Mallet in Somerset possibly proves the exception to the rule. The 'ington' names need not, however, necessarily be late or later than 'ing' names (see below).

Englishcombe and Inglesbatch could indicate the existence of pockets of early English in the Bath region, presumably tolerated by the Welsh. The trails of 'ington' names follow narrow paths across both northern and southern Somerset, conforming with early English burials in the region. They may be confirmation of the existence of small English enclaves in areas still under Welsh control during the



period 500 AD to 650 AD. Pressure from such immigrants may have caused English leaders to attempt to take over the area at an early period, in which case we should be looking for a culmination of such an attempt, (i.e. Badon) in this region. Hengest's son Aesc is thought by some to have fought and died at Badon I and certainly Aesc's Kentish men had a long history of success against the Welsh before that time, but entries in the *ASC* for the years preceding the first battle of Badon

indicate a new wave of settlers on the south coast which included Aelle and Cerdic amongst their leaders. Any of these or the upper Thames English could equally well have been the aggressors, on the basis of existing knowledge.

Some healthy doubts are raised about the position in chronological terms of the 'ingas' names by Gordon Copley.[14] An analysis of the occurrence of 5th-century English archaeological finds related to placename types shows the following: For a name ending in 'caester' there is a 47% chance of it representing English evidence pre-500 AD (these could be mercenary artefacts); for an 'ington' name there is a 43% chance; for both 'inga' and 'ham' names there is a 39% likelihood; with 'burgh' there is a 24% possibility of English finds pre-500 AD.

The significance for our study is the validation of place names ending in 'ington' as early English settlements. The fairly common occurrence of 'ington' placenames in the south and west and the survival of hybrid names such as Batcombe (cwm) near Bruton and rivers bearing Welsh names such as Frome or Avon (the Welsh word for river) suggests a higher degree of integration than is evident either west of the Severn in Wales, where practically all names are Welsh, or further east where they have been almost entirely replaced by English placenames. This assertion may be readily confirmed by study of a map of south-western Britain to a scale of 1:250,000 or larger. This suggests a slow and piecemeal absorption of English settlers in the period before the campaign of 650 AD.

From a study of the archaeological finds and the established early English placenames, we cannot be any more positive about the location of the first battle of Badon than to suggest that it probably occurred outside the area of consolidated English settlement. The English were beaten at Badon I by the Welsh and it is reasonable to suppose that the victors subsequently fixed the frontier at the eastern limit of their sphere of influence.

On this basis we would exclude Badby in Northamptonshire as the site for Badon as it is situated in an area of uninterrupted English settlement. This is shown by events in the *Chronicle* and by settlement evidence of the pagan period.

Buttington near Welshpool appears to be too far west, being in an area which remained Welsh during the period of partition. The remaining locations are all plausible candidates unless it is accepted that there were two battles of Badon and that they took place at the same site. Then only Baden Hill, Badbury Rings and Bath become plausible contenders for both battles, since only they are within the area of the second English advance following the battle of Bradford-on-Avon in 652 AD. Liddington and Baydon would both be well behind English lines in 665 AD.

Baden Hill in northern Avon has no known historical significance as an urban centre or fortified area, and there is no reason to suppose that it was the battle site other than the acceptability of its placename. As far as we know, this is the first time the site has been suggested and we do so merely to point out that the choice of potential sites for Badon can be unduly influenced by concentration on the prefix 'Bad'.

Although Badbury Rings is a splendid Iron Age site which could, like South Cadbury, have been refortified, no contemporary source suggests that it was involved in a campaign on the two dates in question, 516 AD and 665 AD and there has yet to be produced any evidence of Migration Period activity.

We are thus left with Bath, which appears to have the wrong name, but is in the place where we would expect to see the English on the offensive at both dates.

Bath

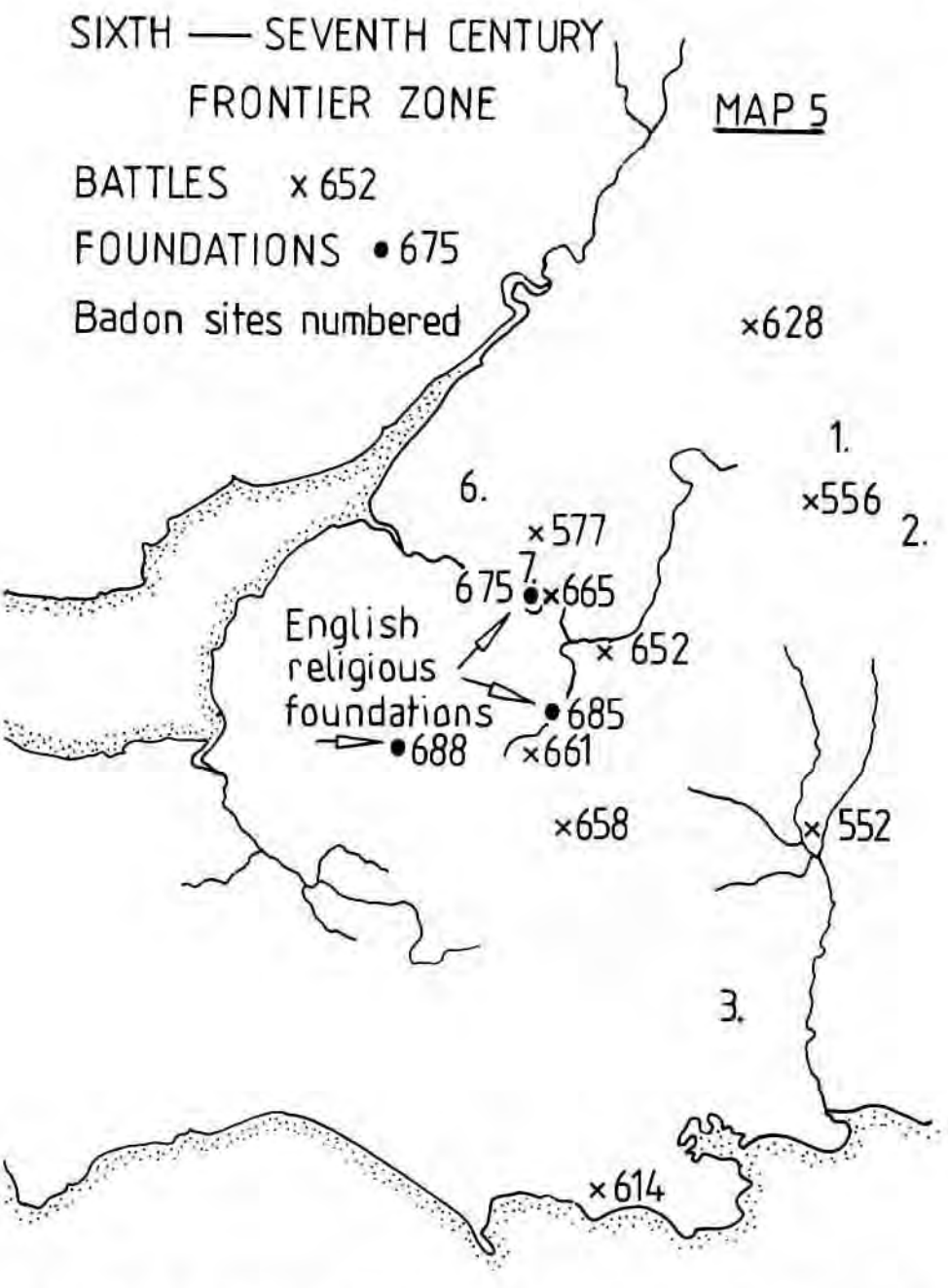
If it can be shown that Bath was also the site of the second Badon battle it may strengthen its case as the first. We need to know where the frontier zone was in 665 AD after the English territorial gains, which should indicate roughly where the

battle took place. The sources give us a great deal of evidence to assess this. The writer of the Welsh Annals' entry for 665 AD may well have been resident at a south Wales monastery such as Llanilltud Fawr (Llantwit Major) and could gain no advantage from invention. Contemporary readers would have been able to refute an inaccurate entry. Welsh Annals entries from this period are often corroborated by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and we are inclined to accept them at face value. Indeed, the *Chronicle* and Annals provide us with a clear picture of events immediately before this date (map 5). We have used generally accepted locations for the named battles, i.e. Salisbury 552 AD, Barbury 556 AD, Dyrham 577 AD, Alton Priors 592 AD, Beandun 614 AD (we favour Lulworth Cove in Dorset rather than south of Axminster in Devon), Cirencester 628 AD, Bradford-on-Avon 652 AD, Penselwood 658 AD and Posentesburgh 661 AD (taken here to be the site favoured by Porter, Postlebury, near Frome).[15] Finally, in 682 AD 'Centwine drove the Britons as far as the sea'. In 611 AD Cynegils succeeded to Wessex and fought against Penda of Mercia at Cirencester in 628 AD. The absence of references to the Severn area during Cynegils' campaign is consistent with it remaining in Welsh hands during his reign, so the frontier must have been to the east and north. It can be seen that there was a great deal of activity involving the English leaders to the east of the postulated frontier, but no record of expansion west of Selwood until after the battle of Bradford. As far as Somerset is concerned these were the last days of the peace described by Gildas. Badon II was evidently west but not far from Bradford-on-Avon, judging by the slow pace of conquest in previous years. These must have been desperate last ditch battles by the Welsh to prevent separation of the south-western peninsula from what has become Wales.

The religious foundations recorded in the Charters indicate the extent of English landownership and domination following the consolidation of Wessex. Cynegils, Cwichelm and Cuthred were baptised in the period between 635 and 639 AD and the Saxon foundations of the Abbey at Bath, the monastery at Frome and Ine's church at Glastonbury are dated 675 AD, 685 AD and 688 AD respectively. The latter was certainly on the site of an existing Welsh (Celtic) church, the others possibly so. After the second battle of Badon the English were able to dispose of land in the area as they saw fit, without reference to the Celtic church or to Welsh land owners. The missionary bishop Aldhelm consolidated the power of the English Church west of Selwood.

The English religious foundation at Bath in 675 AD occurred ten years after the Annals' record of the second battle of Badon. In the charter relating to it,[16] Osric, the king of Hwicce, an English sub-kingdom of Mercia, made a grant to Bath Abbey. Clearly by that date the Welsh had permanently lost control of northern Somerset. It is equally clear that the learned brothers of Llanilltud Fawr, where Gildas had been a student, would have known of religious and military events so close to their sphere of influence.

The placename Badon itself gives clues to the battle site in the context of the written sources. There are significant variants of the name Bath as it appears in historic documents. Between the 6th century and the 12th the written forms of the placename were numerous. The Burghal Hidage documents,[17] 13th-century copies of early 10th-century English originals, spell Bath in five ways: Baðan, baderan, badecan, bathe and Badaran, with Baðan and bathe being the most commonly used spellings. The symbol 'ð' is the 'thorn' of the Old English alphabet (pronounced 'th'). In these documents it is clear that the place referred to in this list of Alfred's fortified towns is the city of Bath. It is also clear that the writer or writers were using their own choice of spellings with both endings and consonants appearing in drastically different forms. This may have depended upon the linguistic identity of



the writers and their level of familiarity with the language in which they were writing. The frequent use of 'd' as the second consonant is particularly interesting. The modern reader may find it difficult to accept that Bathe, Baderan and Baðan are one and the same place, yet to the 13th-century English, Welsh or Norman scribe they evidently were. The reason for this becomes clear with examination of earlier forms of the name.

The form Bathu was used in the 12th-century copy of the foundation charter in the Bath Cartulary,[18] which recorded the significant gift of land by Osric of the Hwicce to the Abbess Berta in 675 AD (ten years after the 'Bellum Badonis Secundo' of the Welsh Annals).

In the 11th-century Domesday Book the various forms used are Batha, Bathae, Bathoniensis, Bada and Bade. The Norman scribes, writing in Latin, also had problems in recording the second consonant, yet if the prefix had been pronounced 'bad' there would have been no difficulty, since a hard 'd' is spoken and written in Latin. They would, however, have had difficulty in recording the 'th' sound which is not generally used in Latin or spoken French. Since Latin was used by Welsh writers until well into the medieval period the consequence for the 'th' sound was that it was shown as the nearest equivalent written consonant 'd'. This is why we have the interchangeable 'Bad' and 'Bath' prefixes for the placename Bath. The English writers of the Burghal Hidage, on the other hand, had no problem in recording the sound 'th' with which they were familiar in speech: they simply used the Old English 'ð'.

The English thorn also appears in 796 AD, when King Ecgfrith of Mercia issued a charter from 'that celebrated town which is called in Saxon tongue aet Baðun'.[19] It is a short step from this written form to the Latin 'Badon' which should be pronounced, not with a hard 'd' but with a 'th' sound.

We have explained why 'd' and 'th' were interchangeable, but how did Bath obtain its name or become the written Badon encountered in the sources? Why is it not called *Aquae Sulis* to this day or an English form of the Latin name? Perhaps the use of *Sulis* was dropped when the Romans adopted Christianity. Certainly the later Christian Welsh would have had no use for a dedication to a pagan god. We could then speculate that a name might evolve out of *Aquae* (waters), and in a way it did. The name *Aquae Sulis* used during the Roman occupation may have referred to the springs only, as a religious centre, used by Latin speakers only. The indigenous population would probably have continued to use their own Welsh name for a bath, which, if it was the same as in modern Welsh, would have been baddon, pronounced bathon.

From the examples given, one can begin to understand the reason for the variations used in the spelling of Bath. The Welsh users of Latin did not write 'th' but used the letter 'd' to represent the sound. The English scribes used their 'ð' to symbolise the sound they knew was different from the hard 'd'. The written Badon was thus pronounced Bathon.

The *Chronicle* adds to the variety of names for Bath. It refers in one manuscript to Baðanceaster and in another to Baðan when reporting the death of the kings of Cirencester, Gloucester and Bath in 577 AD (the battle of Dyrham). The suffix 'ceaster' was used by the English to indicate a former Roman town.

The Welsh Annals refer to the second battle in the Latin form 'Badonis', and we have the two references in the collection of early works by Nennius to Badonis as well as the 6th-century writings of Gildas who refers to 'Badonici montis', the mount of Badon. These references are tantalising. Two cover the battle of 516 AD when the English tide was turned, but none gives a geographical description of the location of the site. It may be reasonable to presume that it was so well known at the time of writing that none was needed. However, evidence of the location of Badon is provided by a gloss on the Nennius document *De Mirabilius Brittaniae* (the wonders of Britain). Here the placename Badonis is used when referring to the third wonder, the hot lake 'in quo balnea sunt Badonis' (where the baths of Badon are). Nennius goes on to write that Badon is in the country of the Hwicce. We have already seen that Osric of the Hwicce granted lands to Bath Abbey in 675 AD.

Bath, of course, was in the land of the Hwicce and it has the hot baths. Nennius is here undoubtedly describing Bath, so that one may now seriously consider that his Badon of the hot spring and the battle of Badon which he mentions when talking of the campaigns of Arthur are one and the same place.

The English poet who composed the doleful poem *The Ruin*[20] described the crumbling remnants of an old Roman town and concluded with the words 'there stood courts of stone and a stream gushed forth in rippling floods of hot water'. If this was a reference to Bath, which seems likely, then we have some idea of the visible remains during the post-Roman period, which gives meaning to Nennius' references.

Sammes, a 17th-century antiquary, quoted by Wood[21] in the 18th century, stated that in his time one of the hills around Bath was commonly known by two names, Lansdown and Mons Badonca. Could this have been the site of Gildas' 'obsessionis Badonici montis'?

Taking into consideration the position of the almost stationary frontier which existed between the English and Welsh in the south west from 516 AD until 652 AD, the conclusion of this exercise must be that the two battles of Badon, recorded in the Welsh Annals, took place at or near the town known to the English as Baðon and to the Latin writers as Badon and to the modern Welsh as Caerfaddon. The pronunciation mutations of modern Welsh account for the change in the letter from b to f and of course the modern Welsh has added the prefix Caer, meaning city.

If Badon is Bath of hot lake fame then surely the 'monte Badonis' is a hill in the vicinity of the hot baths. No contemporary reader would have been in any doubt as to its location; he would immediately have recognised that Osric's Bathu, Ecgfrith's Baðun and Nennius' Badonis were one and the same place, because despite the differing spellings, they knew the well-used pronunciation of the placename.

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