

PROCOPIUS ON BRITTIA AND BRITANNIA

Procopius, *Bell. Goth.* 8.20 (pp. 589 ff., ed. Haury), gives us information about Britain which is of the first importance, but I have not seen a convincing interpretation of what he says. Since the standard English translation, that of H. B. Dewing in the Loeb series (vol. v, pp. 252 ff.), includes a number of unfortunate mistakes, I give a literal translation of some of Procopius' sentences.

viii. 20 § 4: The island of Brittia lies in this [the northern] ocean, not far from the shore, rather about 200 stades away, approximately opposite the mouths [not 'mouth', as Dewing renders it] of the Rhine; and it is between Britannia and the island of Thule.

Of one thing we can be certain: Bury showed many years ago that Thule is Scandinavia.¹ The great problems are, What is the difference, if any, between Brittia and Britannia? And, Where did they lie? For those who read the English version of Procopius Dewing has bedevilled the last sentence of § 4 by rendering 'between the islands of Britain and Thule', a translation which makes Britannia as well as Brittia an island. We shall see that this is a capital mistake. Procopius repeatedly describes Brittia as an island;² he never describes Britannia as such (see p. 499 below). Our first question is, Where did Brittia lie? Bury mentions works in which scholars identified it with Heligoland and even with Rügen in the Baltic Sea.³ So great a scholar as Ernst Stein equated it with Jutland—and he was not the first historian to do so.⁴ But this led him into difficulties. He was obliged to suppose that Jutland, which now becomes an island, had Frisian settlers in it; and above all he had to overlook a passage of Procopius which leaves the matter in no doubt. In § 42 of this chapter the historian states that 'in this island of Brittia men of olden times built a long wall, cutting off a large portion of it', etc. There could hardly be a clearer indication that the island of Brittia means Britain. As Bury saw, this is undeniable and should never have been called in question. The point is proved by the name, the wall, its island character, and, as we shall see, the three nations which inhabit it.⁵ A much more difficult problem is, What did Procopius mean by Britannia?

§ 5: Whereas Britannia lies towards the west [of Brittia, presumably] opposite the extremities of the land of the Spaniards, separated from the mainland [of the Spaniards] by about 4,000 stades,⁶ no less, Brittia on the other hand faces the rear of Gaul, the parts of it facing the ocean—clearly, to the north of Spain and Britannia.

¹ J. B. Bury, 'The Homeric and the Historic Kimmerians', *Klio* vi (1906), 79–88, at 80 n. 3, referring to *Bell. Goth.* 6.15.4 ff. (p. 215, Haury). The title of this important paper would not lead the reader to suppose that it includes a discussion of Procopius on Britain; and that perhaps is why so many recent historians have overlooked it.

² *Bell. Goth.* 8.20.1, 4, 6, 7, 10, *et saepe*.

³ Bury, p. 82 n. 2, cf. B. Rubin, *Prokopios von Kaisereia* (Stuttgart, 1954), col. 240.

⁴ E. Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire*, ii

(Paris, 1949), pp. 718 f.

⁵ Bury, pp. 82 f. So also E. A. Freeman, *Western Europe in the Fifth Century* (London, 1904), p. 160 n., 'Nothing can be plainer than that here *Brittia* and not *Britannia* is Britain', but Gibbon, iv, 157 n. 168 (ed. Bury) thought that Brittia and Britannia were one and the same place though Procopius 'weakly attempts to distinguish the islands'.

⁶ Not '400 stades', as Dewing says by a lamentable slip, and is strangely followed by P. N. Ure, *Justinian and His Age* (London, 1951), p. 246 ('fifty miles'), and A. R.

Britannia, then, lies 4,000 stades away, not from the 'mainland' of Europe—that would indeed make it an island—but from the mainland of the Spaniards, whom Procopius mentioned in the previous clause. It is a misunderstanding of this point, I think, that has led so many scholars to suppose Britannia to have been an island: Britannia is said to be separated from the mainland of Spain, not from that of Europe.

This description of the geographical position of Brittitia appears at first sight to be something of a jumble. But in fact Procopius' description is correct by the standards of ancient historians, for a number of the most eminent writers of antiquity—Julius Caesar and Tacitus among them⁷—thought that the west coast of Britain faces the north coast of Spain and hence that the whole island is situated north of Spain. They pictured Britain as stretching from east to west; the Wall ran from south to north, so that Procopius can speak of the inhabited land 'east' of the wall and the desolation 'west' of it (§§ 43, 45). Bury put forward an ingenious theory that Procopius' informants did indeed mean Britain when they spoke of Brittitia, but that our historian did not recognize it as Britain because of the marvels which his informants added and which he reports a few pages later—the absence of horses from it, the fact that you die if you cross the wall, the ferrying of ghosts there. It seemed incredible that such things could happen in the Britain which had for so long been a province of the Roman Empire. Brittitia must therefore be a different island, situated between the real Britain and Scandinavia. It is a 'ghost Britain', a *Doppelgängerin*, as Bury calls it, lying in the North Sea. Frankly, I find it hard to believe that one of the greatest of the Greek historians could have fallen into such an elementary trap, especially as he did not believe the story of the ferrying of souls from the Continent to Britain. I would suggest that we must return to an earlier opinion of Bury which he put forward in a footnote to his edition of Gibbon in 1897 but retracted in 1906. The basic difficulties of the geography can be resolved at one stroke if we assume that by 'Britannia' Procopius meant what had hitherto been called Armorica and is still called 'Brittany'.⁸ As we have seen, he never describes 'Britannia' as an island. He says that it faces mainland Spain, from which it is distant some 4,000 stades, that it lies 'to the west' of Brittitia, and that Brittitia lies to the north of it. All these conditions suit Brittany admirably.

§ 6: Three very populous nations inhabit the island of Brittitia, and one king is set over each of them. And the names of these nations are Angles, Frisians, and Britons who have the same name as the island.

The remark that each of the three peoples has a king of its own may mean no more than that the three peoples are independent of one another. The truth of his statement that the Frisians took a substantial part in the invasions of Britain has not been doubted, I think, since Stenton argued for it in 1943.⁹ Place-name evidence even enables us to pin-point some of the Frisian settlements. But that is a difficult subject: some place-names containing the name of the Frisians may be

Burn, 'Procopius and the Island of Ghosts', *English Historical Review* lxx (1955), 258–61, at 258.

⁷ For references see conveniently Ogilvie and Richmond on Tacitus, *Agr.* 10.2; Gibbon, iv, 156 f., ed. Bury.

⁸ Bury, p. 83 n. 1. For his earlier view see his Gibbon, iv, 157 n. 168. Burn, p. 258, thinks that there can be no doubt that both Brittitia and Britannia alike represent Britain.

⁹ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*² (Oxford, 1947), p. 6.

much later in date than the migration period. At all events, they do not indicate any area of massive Frisian settlement, such as Procopius would seem to imply.¹⁰ Bede certainly did not know of any extensive Frisian settlement of lasting importance.¹¹

§ 8: So great *apparently* is the multitude of these peoples that every year in large groups they migrate from there [Brittia] with their women and children and go to the Franks.

I have italicized the word 'apparently'. Whatever Procopius' informant may have told him, the historian was not quite certain of the reason for the migration. That it was due to over-population was a conjecture, and it did not wholly convince him. We must therefore read with caution the far-reaching conclusions which Stenton drew from the passage: 'whatever may have been the English frontier after the battle of Mons Badonicus, it cannot have been materially extended against the Britons during the long peace which followed.'¹² Procopius' statement, according to Stenton, becomes 'a warning against the assumption that the war left the English in possession of the centre as well as the east and south-east of Britain'. So, too, Mrs Chadwick, who speaks of 'the hold-up in the Saxon penetration from south-eastern into central Britain, and an over-population in the parts already in Saxon possession'.¹³ I believe that there is one piece of evidence which tells decisively against these conclusions. When discussing this passage of Procopius we must never forget Gildas, who was writing towards the middle of the sixth century—that is, almost at the very moment to which Procopius' informant was referring. He tells us explicitly and sadly that at the time when he was writing the English advance had penetrated west of the Severn. Gildas says that the tombs of two Christian martyrs at Caerleon could not be visited by Britons in his time: they lay in the country of the invaders.¹⁴ But if the invaders were already west of the Severn we can hardly believe that they 'were restricted to a territory which gave them no adequate opportunity for providing for a growing population by the establishment of new inland colonies'.¹⁵ Gildas shows that Procopius' scepticism on this point was justified. Density of population was not the reason for the migration from Britain to the Continent. Whether his caution on this matter was due to his own perspicacity or whether his informant was equally sceptical, of course, we have no means of knowing.

§ 9: And they are settling them in what seems to be the more desolate part of their land, and as a result of this they say they are gaining possession of the island.

He refers to one part of the Franks' land—not, I think, to several widely separated parts. The settlements which he has in mind are those in Armorica, and his

¹⁰ E. Ekwall, 'Tribal Names in English Place-Names', *Namn och Bygd* xli (1953), 129–77, at 151–3.

¹¹ On Bede and the Frisians see some interesting remarks by J. N. L. Myres, 'The Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes', *Proceedings of the British Academy* lvi (1970), 145–74, at 151.

¹² Stenton, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Incidentally, there might not seem to be much difficulty in translating this sentence of Procopius; yet Mrs N. K. Chadwick, 'The Colonization

of Brittany from Celtic Britain', *Proceedings of the British Academy* li (1965), 235–99, at 260, speaks as though only women and children migrated, while P. Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 18, represents the English and Frisians as emigrating without any reference to the Britons.

¹³ Mrs Chadwick, p. 262.

¹⁴ Gildas, *De Excidio* 10.2.

¹⁵ Stenton, *loc. cit.*

words give no support to an alleged settlement of Saxons elsewhere, for example, north of the River Unstrut in addition to those in Armorica.¹⁶

§ 10: So that not long ago the king of the Franks actually sent some of his friends to the Emperor Justinian in Byzantium, and despatched with them men of the Angles, claiming that this island [Britain], too, is ruled by him. Such then are the matters concerning the island called Britia.

It may well be that Procopius derived some at least of his information about north-western Europe from a member of this delegation. Such an opinion is at least as old as Gibbon (iv, p. 157, ed. Bury). It would not follow that he had himself met any of the envoys: he may well have obtained his knowledge at second or third hand. In any case, the envoys are not likely to have spoken Greek, so that his knowledge has gone through at least one translation (from Latin to Greek) before he wrote it down. From these men (directly or indirectly) he will have learned of the migration from Britia and of the Frankish king's claims. (If we suppose that these ambassadors were not ultimately his source of information, we have to fall back on a not very convincing theory which Bury advanced, namely, that the information was derived from some Heruls who had travelled to Denmark and Scandinavia for reasons which we need not go into now.¹⁷ But had not these Heruls made their way to a part of Europe that was too far to the east for them to have collected much accurate information about Britain?) Let us agree that Procopius derived some of his information from the Frankish envoys.

But the great difficulty here is the Franks' alleged claim that they are winning over the island of Britia. Scholars may dispute the attitude of the Frankish kings towards Ethelbert of Kent when he married the Frankish princess, Bertha, somewhat before 563. According to some, they regarded him as being now a subordinate; according to others, he was an equal.¹⁸ But it is hard indeed to believe that even before 553, when Procopius finished Book 8 of his *History*, the Franks were already claiming to be winning over the island of Britain. It was an island in which the Merovings had hitherto shown no interest, so far as we know. And is it conceivable that the king based his claim on nothing better than the fact that numbers of its inhabitants had left the island and were settling in Armorica? Did he really expect such an argument to impress Justinian? And how did he propose to enforce his claim? It would seem that on any interpretation we must ascribe a mistake to Procopius. *Either* he misunderstood his informants and imputed to the Frankish kings a claim to suzerainty over Britain which in fact they cannot have maintained, *or* at this point he himself became confused between Britia and Britannia. I would suggest that his informant said that the Frankish king was claiming to rule Brittany, not Britain, and that Procopius misunderstood what was intended. And in point of fact at precisely

¹⁶ *Contra*, Stenton, pp. 5, 7, followed by Mrs Chadwick, p. 262. I do not think that the *Translatio S. Alexandri*, on which they rely, is of value in this connection.

¹⁷ Bury, pp. 81 ff., but in his *History of the Later Roman Empire*, ii (London, 1923), p. 258 n. 4, Bury changed his mind and says that the Angles in the embassy 'doubtless supplied Procopius with the material for

his curious account' of Britain.

¹⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Hist. Franc.* 9.26; Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* 1.25, cf. Stenton, p. 59 ('dependent'), W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), p. 5 ('equality'). The mysterious words *subiectos vestros* of Gregory the Great, *Reg.* 6.49, are too late to concern us.

that time this is exactly what the Frankish authorities were trying to do. Since the death of Clovis in 511 the Franks had claimed that Armorica was under their sway; and they were now trying to stop the rulers there from calling themselves 'kings' and to impose the title of 'count' upon them. The fact that they failed to gain control of Brittany now and for many a year to come is beside the point for our purpose.¹⁹

Be that as it may, I conclude that when Procopius speaks of Britannia he means Brittany and that any other interpretation of the term makes him write nonsense. That Britannia is Brittany is shown, I suggest, by his account of its geographical situation—it lies to the west facing Spain, and Brittia lies to the north between it and Scandinavia—by the Frankish king's claim (as I believe) to rule it, and not least by its name. If we agree on this identification, then this passage of Procopius is the earliest in which Armorica is called 'Britain'. Three Latin writers of the sixth century—Venantius Fortunatus, the chronicler Marius of Avenches, and Gregory of Tours²⁰—use this name: but they were all writing in the last decade of the century, so that Procopius' use of it is some forty years earlier than theirs. But that is not surprising. Marius of Avenches uses the term when speaking of events which took place in 560, and Gregory of Tours uses it when speaking of what happened in the 560s. Another conclusion that we can draw from Procopius' use of the name is that his informant must have used the term 'Britannia'. That is to say, in my belief, the Frankish envoys referred to Armorica as 'Britannia'. The word could not possibly have been Procopius' invention in this connection. If the envoys (assuming that it was they) had spoken of 'Armorica', the historian would beyond doubt have reproduced the word by 'Arborychi', the term that he uses elsewhere for the Armoricans.²¹ Thus, Procopius shows us that 'Brittania' was the current term in Frankish official circles as the name for Armorica at the middle of the sixth century.

It is clear that the migration from Britain to Armorica was still in progress at the time when the embassy was in Byzantium. If a traveller volunteered information, or if he was asked questions, about his native land, he would naturally tell of those matters that were foremost in his mind. We cannot reasonably suppose that he would linger over events that had happened decades earlier. The envoys would tell of what was going on in the present rather than, say, what had happened in the days of Sidonius Apollinaris. Hence we can scarcely doubt that in the 540s the British migration was in full swing. And so Procopius speaks of the migration in the present tense (§§ 8–9). It is therefore hardly correct to say that 'the migrations lack any direct contemporary evidence', or that 'no Continental writer of the fifth and sixth centuries records the migrations directly'.²² Procopius does precisely that.

It would be wrong to describe the settlement in Armorica as a controlled one, wholly under the direction of the Frankish king. Procopius clearly thought that the king was directing the immigrants to a specified part of his realm (a view

¹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Hist. Franc.* 4.4; cf. Procopius, *Bell. Goth.* 5.12.12 ff. My scepticism seems to have been anticipated by Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 160, 'To be sure we have to put up with hints that the Frankish kings claimed the overlordship of the island', etc.

²⁰ Marius, s.a. 560.2 (*Chronica Minora*, ii, 237).

²¹ *Bell. Goth.* 5.12.9 and 13 ff.

²² So Dermot Fahy, 'When Did the Britons Become Bretons?', *Welsh History Review* ii (1964–5), 111–24, at 111, 124.

of which we may well be sceptical, for the king did not control Armorica, though what Procopius reports is no doubt what the ambassadors claimed). But the Franks had not invited the migrants to their shores: they did not initiate the migration, nor could they have stopped it if they had had a mind to do so. Is it likely then that the king could have controlled the direction in which the migrants moved? It may not be irrelevant to point out that the immigration of Britons into Armorica which had taken place early in the second half of the fifth century was equally uncontrolled: the Imperial government at that date was in no position to exercise authority in so distant a region.²³ At least one of the fifth-century migrations was on a massive scale, for we hear of a force of no less than 12,000 British warriors operating in Gaul; and therefore presumably there were some 50,000 persons involved in it. When the Emperor Anthemius (467–72) wanted to use these Britons in Gaul against the Visigoths, we are told, 'he asked the help of the Britons': and the phrase clearly implies that these Britons were free agents, who might or might not agree to help him.²⁴ And even earlier, in 451, when Aetius fought the Huns at the battle of the Catalaunian Plains, he received help from various foreign peoples, such as the Franks, Saxons, Sarmatians, and others; and the list of his allies includes the *Armoriciani*. This, of course, was in the days before any British migrants had arrived there (so far as we know); and the clear implication is that even then the Armoricans were as independent of Rome as were the Saxons and the others.²⁵ That is to say, the land to which the fifth-century Britons fled was as free from outside control as the land to which other Britons fled in the time of Procopius. For the century 450 to 550 Armorica was an independent country; and what Procopius is describing, I think, is the Frankish kings' efforts to put an end to that independence. But whether the kings were claiming to rule Britain or Brittany, they failed in their attempt. In any event, the migration into Brittany had begun long before the Franks established any sort of control there; and I believe that the purpose of the embassy in Byzantium was to secure Justinian's recognition of a Frankish claim to rule Armorica, for Procopius tells us, rightly or wrongly, that 'the Franks never thought that they had gained possession of the Gallic provinces securely unless the Emperor had set his seal upon this work of theirs,' *Bell. Goth.* 7.33.4.²⁶

If it is agreed that Armorica had changed its name to Brittany before 550, at any rate among the Franks (for we do not know what the inhabitants called it), we must bear in mind that a country would acquire a new name slowly.²⁷ The new inhabitants must be settled in it in overwhelming numbers. It must be clear that the immigrants have come to stay and will never leave. The new state of affairs must be recognized as permanent. It is inconceivable, for example, that Armorica could have come to be called 'Britannia' in the lifetime of Sidonius Apollinaris, when the movements of population were only beginning. As a contrast we may recall the case of the land (approximately the modern Rumania)

²³ *Contra*, Mrs Chadwick, p. 257.

²⁴ Jordanes, *Get.* 237 'Brittonum solacia postulavit'. Sidonius' references to these Britons give no hint that they were subject to the Emperors.

²⁵ Jordanes, *Get.* 191; cf. Sidonius, *carm.* vii. 547.

²⁶ In view of this passage of Jordanes I

find it hard to accept the view of Fahy, p. 122, that 'there is no real evidence for large-scale movements to Brittany in the fifth century.' The term 'large-scale' is a relative one, but it surely applies to a movement which could field 12,000 warriors in the fifth century.

²⁷ Cf. Mrs Chadwick, p. 270.

where the Visigoths lived for a century, a land which was known to the Romans as 'Gothia'. The Visigoths were driven out of it by the Huns in 376, and yet Orosius still refers to it as 'Gothia' as late as 417.²⁸ The population there was so shifting throughout the forty years since the Goths had left, and conditions in it were so obscure, that no new name had attached itself to the land. Not so in Armorica. At the time when Procopius was writing, all the necessary conditions had been fulfilled. Armorica was now unalterably British; and Britons were still pouring into it. They had now decidedly outnumbered the native Romans. Hence, it had come to be called 'Britain'—though not universally. It would have been strange if the old name had disappeared without leaving a trace. At the Council of Tours, which met in 567, the bishops speak of 'Briton or Roman in Armorica'.²⁹ The phrase shows that the old name could still be heard, and the 'Roman' who still survived in the country will have been the last to use the new term. But if Procopius' informants were Frankish officials, the official name was now Britannia. This canon of the Council of Tours also shows, by the way, that British newcomer and Roman native had not yet fused—and it would indeed be surprising if they had already done so at that early date.

This entire chapter of Procopius' *History* is a digression. Its contents have nothing whatever to do with the steppe nomads, whose activities in 551 he was discussing in the previous chapter, or with the Gothic war, which he goes on to narrate in the chapters which follow. And being a digression, as Bury thought, it seems probable that it was just at this time that Procopius heard of the episode. He turned aside abruptly from his great task of writing the history of Justinian's wars in order to include some 'hot' news about the far north-west which had just come to his ears.³⁰ The whole passage about Brittia and Britannia which we have been discussing is inserted merely to form the geographical and historical background to the story of the prince of the Warni, Radigis, and how he was defeated by the Anglian princess whom he had jilted and yet was forgiven by her—forgiven on condition that he married her after all. Beyond any doubt the story of Radigis originated in the North, as Chadwick showed. But there is no reason to think that it originated in Britain. The story is about Radigis and his father Hermegisclus rather than about the princess of Brittia, who is not even named, and her brother, the king of the Angles, who unhappily is also unnamed. That is to say, the story seems to have originated on the mainland of the Continent among the Warni or perhaps even among the Franks. It did not originate in the island of Brittia.³¹

²⁸ Orosius, *Hist.* 1.2.53.

²⁹ Canon 9, p. 124, Maassen.

³⁰ Bury, p. 81.

³¹ That the story of Radigis originated in the North was shown by H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912), pp. 97–9. Cf. C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, repr. 1964), p. 44 (cf. 283 f.), 'Procopius' account . . . looks like a loan from a poem of Frankish origin.' Chadwick with less than his usual caution wrote that 'there is no ground for disputing that it has a historical basis'. Burn, p. 259, also speaks of the 'perhaps basically historical saga of Radigis', while R. S. Lopez, 'Le problème des relations

anglo-byzantines du septième au dixième siècle', *Byzantion* xviii (1948), 139–62, at 141, thinks on the basis of this tale that the Angles could put 400 ships to sea, and that the Angles in the Frankish embassy may have told Procopius about their recent naval victory over the Warni! And John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (London, 1973), p. 287, though not believing that Hermegisclus understood the language of birds, accepts practically every other detail of the story, writing vividly of 'the outraged English virgin'. On the other hand, Gibbon, iv, 157, was sceptical, 'a singular, though an improbable, adventure, which announces

But if Procopius inserted the story into his narrative as a digression because in 552 to 553 he had just heard it, this would help to confirm the view that his source for the tale was the Frankish ambassadors. It would be a remarkable coincidence if some other authority for the story of Radigis had reached Byzantium at precisely the time when the ambassadors arrived there. But we must not go too far. We may indeed ascribe the story of Radigis to the embassy, but it does not follow that they also supplied the information in §§ 1–10 on the geography of Brittia and Britannia. This geographical passage contains information that will have been far from unknown among educated Byzantines in the mid-sixth century. Procopius acquired it, no doubt, from his education and his general reading.

Whatever the source or sources of §§ 1–46 of this chapter, the historian leaves us in no doubt about his source for the notorious passage which follows, the description of the transport of the souls of the dead from the Continent to England. This was not derived from a written source: he says explicitly that the practice was common knowledge in Byzantium. He himself does not believe this tale: it was a myth. He tells it under protest; but if he undertakes to write about Britain at all and omits this myth, he will be accused of not knowing it, of being ill informed, and of being ignorant of what goes on in Britain (§ 47). He stresses on no fewer than four occasions that this story is what 'the men of that place' say (§§ 48, 49, 50, 58). He is not quoting historians or ambassadors in this context or Franks or Heruls or the like. His story was common knowledge in Byzantium because it was told by persons who had actually taken part (as they claimed) in the ferrying of the souls. These were not residents in Britain, of course, but lived on the Continental coast facing Britain. Unhappily, Procopius does not specify their nationality. They were not Franks, for he says that they were subjects of the Franks (§ 49). Whether they were Frisians or Warni or neither, he does not say. But what is most surprising is that he claims to have 'often heard the men of that region describing it very earnestly' (§ 48). The clear implication is that persons whose homes were on the coast of the Continent facing Britain were easily to be met with at Byzantium, where his readers had also met them and would criticize him if he omitted these men's story. This seems as difficult to explain as the statement which Procopius makes elsewhere that Justinian even paid sums of money to persons living as far afield as Britain.³² The peoples who received such payments, he adds, 'kept streaming from the

the spirit, rather than the delicacy, of an English heroine'. In his notes to Gibbon, Bury (iv, 157 n. 169), describes the story as 'legendary'; and that, in my belief, is the correct attitude.

³² *Anecdota*, 19.13. On this see J. O. Ward, 'Procopius, *Bell. Goth.* ii.6.28: The Problem of Contacts Between Justinian I and Britain', *Byzantion* xxxviii (1968), 460–71, at 465. It must not be supposed that there is archaeological evidence for much intercourse between Britain and the Mediterranean at this date. See Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (London, 1971), p. 206, 'We should probably think of occasional ships, arriving irregularly with long

intervals between each visit, rather than any regular, organized and intensive trade', and the whole judicious passage. I am not competent to comment on the Latin inscription found at Penmachno, Caernarvonshire, and dated 'in tempore Iustini consulis', i.e. AD 540: see V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff, 1950), p. 93, No. 104, who remarks that the inscription seems to indicate contacts between Wales and Gaul (Burgundy). But P. K. Johnstone, 'A Consular Chronology of Dark Age Britain', *Antiquity* xxxvi (1962), 102–9, suggests direct contacts with the Mediterranean by the Atlantic seaways.

whole earth to Byzantium' in order to lay their hands on more cash. Were there Britons included in the stream? Surely not on many occasions, if at all. And yet Procopius implies that his informants on the transport of souls could easily be found, that their story was familiar to the reading public, and that he himself had often spoken to them. But they were from the Continent. They were not Britons. There is no indication in his text that he had any contacts with the inhabitants of that island.

What then does he know about Britain? Let us agree that his geographical description (§§ 4–5) is satisfactory by the standards of his time. Many scholars think that by 'Brittia' he meant Britain, and I have argued that by 'Britannia' he meant Armorica. But whether or not this last point is correct, he has been inconsistent with his usage elsewhere by calling Britain 'Brittia', for in earlier books of the *History*, when he has occasion to mention Britain, he invariably calls it 'Britannia'. This is the case, for example, in *Bell. Vand.*, 3.2.31 and 38, where he tells of the revolt of Constantine in Britain in 407 and of how after 410 the Romans never recovered Britain, which was thenceforth subject to the rule of 'tyrants'. So, too, in all the other places—they are not many—where he mentions the 'largest of islands'.³³ But it would be unwise to draw too many inferences from this discrepancy. It is probably nothing more than an oversight, though not a characteristic one.

He also knows that the island is inhabited by three nationalities; but he gives no indication that two of the three were invaders and that the third was their victim. He does not say that the Britons were fiercely hostile to the Angles and the Frisians. Evidently he knows nothing of the prolonged series of the invasions. In that passage of the *Bell. Vand.* which was cited in the preceding paragraph he mentions the rule of tyrants in Britain after 410: he does not mention the presence of foreign intruders. In the entire *History* he gives no hint that he knew of massive settlements of invaders in what had once been a Roman province. How the Angles and Frisians came to be in Britain is a question which he does not raise. When he goes on to say that each of the three nationalities has its own king, he seems to imply that each is a political unity. He is unaware that the unity of the Britons had been fragmented, or that the newcomers had arrived in kindreds, retinues, and so on, and that there was nothing even approaching a 'king of the Angles' or the like. He tells us that each of the three peoples was 'very populous': does he do so because he had been told (or had guessed) that the emigration was due to pressure of population, or does he infer from the emigration that the country was over-populated? In either case one of his assertions is a conjecture. He goes on to say what the Frankish kings do with the immigrants (or at any rate what the ambassadors claim that they do) when they arrive in his dominions (or what he claimed to be his dominions): he tells us nothing whatever from the point of view of the migrants. He knows nothing of their motives or attitudes, their emotions or aspirations, or what they did on arriving on the Continent. In a word, all this part of the chapter comes from Frankish informants or from coast-dwellers on the shores facing Britain. Not a word of it is derived directly or indirectly from a British or English source.

From all this there is an important inference. Since the historian did not

³³ Procopius, *Bell. Vand.* 3.1.18. I can find no other author who uses the name 'Brittia' to denote Britain.

know that the Britons were hostile to the Angles and Frisians, he assumed that all the inhabitants of Britain alike might act in common. Hence when he heard that there was a migration from Britain to the Continent he not unnaturally assumed that all three peoples joined forces in it. But can we be sure that this was true? It seems improbable in view of the extraordinary hostility of the Britons towards the invaders, a hostility which was still so bitter that it shocked the Venerable Bede nearly two hundred years later. That the Britons and the invaders should have combined, or even have worked on parallel lines, is all but incredible. I would suggest that Procopius, hearing of a migration from Britain to the Continent, assumed that all three nationalities took part in it: being fellow-countrymen, why doubt that they acted in common? So the theories which Stenton and others have based on this alleged *Rückwanderung* of the English to the Continent ought to be viewed with some caution.³⁴ And our confidence in such theories is not strengthened when we recall that in all probability Procopius did not know that the invaders of Britain were pagan and illiterate whereas the Britons were Christian and by no means wholly illiterate. The historian had no idea, it would seem, of the depth of the chasm which divided the Britons from the invaders.

The two final parts of the chapter—that dealing with the Wall (§§ 42–6) and that recounting the ferrying of souls (§§ 47–58) are interesting examples of what men in France and in Byzantium believed about Britain in the middle of the sixth century; but they are no more than that. The description of the land beyond the Wall—in the pestilential air there human life is impossible, and only snakes and wild animals can survive—is also said to be ‘what the natives say’ (§ 46). But Procopius does not claim in this case to have spoken to the actual ‘natives’ who say this, nor does he tell us that they can frequently be met in Byzantium, like those who told of the ferrying of souls.

What Procopius knows of Britain in the middle of the sixth century, apart from its geographical situation, is an extraordinary mixture of half-truths and wild exaggerations. He knows that three peoples inhabit the island: he does not know that two of the three were relative newcomers. He knows of the emigration to the Continent from Britain: he does not know that it was restricted to one of the three peoples, who fled in fear of the other two. It is true that Hadrian’s Wall divided civilization from barbarism: according to Procopius, it all but marked off life from death. The invaders of Britain will hardly have been able to transport many horses with them to the island: according to the historian, the Britons did not even know what a horse was, nor was there a single horse in the whole of the island. And yet when do we next meet a Byzantine historian who knows as much about Britain as Procopius?³⁵

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³⁴ Stenton, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 ff.

³⁵ I am deeply grateful to my colleague Malcolm Todd for reading this paper and discussing with me some of the problems which it raises. He asks why there should have been a migration from Britain c.550,

as Procopius states. I must leave this question to students of the history of the Anglo-Saxons to answer. It is not easy for a casual reader of the Anglo-Saxon *Chronicle* to discover the explanation.