

‘Elen of the Hosts’ (St Alban and the End of Roman Britain Part 2)

In an attempt to verify that our ‘martyr’ St Alban’s name does represent a continuation of the long tradition of divine names in *albh-*, that we identified in Part I we can - so to speak - look at the problem from the other end again and try to see whether we can see any sign of Alban’s tradition emerging into our medieval Celtic sources: we can resume our search for likely derivatives of ‘Alban/Albios’ in the later cult evidence, returning, this time, to a Brittonic context. There are other Brittonic saints’ names that look very close to the one we have already examined: ‘Elven’. There is the Breton ‘Elouan’ and the Cornish ‘Elwen’ (Loth: 37-8, 131; Gould: II, 449-50), for instance. It is worth bearing in mind the many centuries between the Alban of our 5/6th century records and the late date that these cult names emerge into our records. We might consider whether these might not represent corruptions of an original ‘Elven’, or of a name that contained ‘Elv-’ (< *alb(i)u*) – or names that might easily have been confused with such forms, and so, being more familiar to contemporaries, have come to supplant them in the tradition ?

A different, but similar name might have been arrived at, in other words, by a process of assimilation. Thus the *-wen* of ‘Elwen’ might have been from *-ven*, by sound assimilation and under the influence of the appropriate meaning of *wen*, ‘blessed’¹. The assumption would have to be that the legend of the saint became distorted along with the form of the name and that any association with a Roman era martyr of Verulamium, was forgotten. Of course if we are dealing with an original Celtic cult figure ‘Albio-’, then the associations of such a figure might have been quite diverse, while the legends attached to many Celtic saints have every appearance of being rather late and artificial, anyway. We might note, though, that Saint ‘Elwen’ was associated with a tradition of martyrdom since she was said to be one of the companions of saints Germochus and Breaca, emigrants from Ireland, part of whose company

¹ The entry of Nicholas Roscarrock (Gould: II, 450) “S. Elvitus or Elwin, Confessor at Lhan Hamelac” (Breckon) is typically ambiguous over the precise form of the name, suggesting forms in ‘El-’ (or ‘Elv-’) with different suffixes. The dedication is now to SS. Illtyd (< El-tut, see IV, below) and Peter.

were martyred by the cruel king 'Teudar', according to Leland's notes on a lost 'Life of Breaca' (Doble 1960: I, 106-7 with note 8; Gould: II, 449-8).

A likely corruption of 'Elven', meanwhile, or a form easily reachable by assimilation, might seem to be the name 'Elen'. This form is in fact found ('Elenn') as early as the 10th century probably associated with 'Egloshellings' ('Eglosellans' in 1297) at St Stephen in Brannel, Cornwall.² There is also a Llanelen in Gwent ('Ecclesia de sancta Elena' in 1284: Lunt: 317), another in Gower, a 'Tref Elen' in Pembrokeshire and quite a number of 'wells of Elen' (Padel 1986: 57-8; Loth: 37; Gould: II, 259-60; F. Jones: 1954: 32, 48, 149, 151, 164, 183, 190, 207). In Brittany, near Dol, was a 'parochia Sancti Eleni' in 1267. This became 'Saint-Helen' (there is a Lan-helen in the same diocese : Padel: 58; Loth: 37) and it seems likely that 'Elen' frequently became assimilated to 'Helen'. This was a well known name and one of some prestige in a context of religious myth, being appropriate to the mother of Constantine, who figures prominently in religious legend. Assimilation to this figure might offer an explanation for the female sex of figures like the 'Elena', mentioned above, on the assumption that our original figure, like Alban, was male (although an original pagan cult-figure in 'Albio-/Alb-' might have been female, see further Part III). The 'Helenus' depicted in a fifteenth century window at the Breton Saint-Helen would then represent a persistence of the original tradition, in this respect, while the 'Helena virgo' of the Dol calendar might suggest how easily the tradition could be confused (Loth: 134; Gould: II, 260). There were several dedications to St Helen in Cornwall and Devon (Padel: 57-8; Gould: II, 259-60; Orme: 126, 179) while yet another of the companions of Breaca, Germochus and Elwen (looking suspiciously like a duplication of the latter) was a 'Helena': all of these might represent an original 'Elven' (or other name in *elv-* < *albio*), and if a process of 'multiplication' of an original single figure was involved as different 'devolved' forms of the name (Elwen, Helena, Elena) were adopted in different localised contexts, then that might not have been an

² Padel 1986: 57-8. 'Elenn' is suggested here to be a variant of Cornish 'Elent', but with many doubts: an original 'Elen', of course, might have become assimilated to such a name in a Cornish context. Orme: 117.

unusual phenomenon in the development of Celtic Saints' cults.³ There are, in fact, a host of Celtic saints' names in 'El-', many of which might represent simply that element with a different suffix (El-an, El-oc) or double-suffix in the case of 'El-oc-au', a name which was apparently used for the Breton 'Elouan' (Loth: 37-8; Gould: II, 449-50). It is important that even if the 'El-' in these names is to be regarded as etymologically distinct from our theonym in 'Albi-', whence 'el(v)-' (but see further in Part IV), there is the possibility that they have become absorbed in the theonymic, or 'saintly', tradition associated with the latter by a process of assimilation analogous to the one that allowed an 'Elen' to become a 'Helena'.

That said, there is little, it is true, in their traditions, to connect any of these saints with an original Alban/Albio- : more suggestive, though, in that respect is an 'Elen' mainly associated with Welsh secular legend, but who, nevertheless, looks likely to be linked to the saints of that name as we shall see. In this context it is worth bearing in mind that a once-pagan cult-figure, 'Albio-', might have become 'euheumerised', like any other such figure although there is no reason, in fact, why an analagous process might not also occur with an original Christian cult figure in a secular storytelling context (as we have suggested, in effect, for the 'Ailbe's of Irish secular tradition). The 'Elen' in question is "Elen Luydawc": 'Elen of the hosts', who Rachel Bromwich has described as "in origin a character of early Welsh mythology".

This character appears as an 'ancestor-figure' in the 10th century Dyfed genealogy but under the guise of "Helen Luicdauc", the wife of "Constantii" and mother of "Constantini" (Bartrum 1966: 10, no.2). Evidently by the 10th century at least, the native figure had become assimilated to the famous mother of Constantine which gives us at least one link with some of the saints 'Elen' we have mentioned above. The epithet, here - incongruous for the mother of Constantine - and other references in the Welsh triads and elsewhere do strongly suggest that we have to do with an originally native figure (cf. Bromwich 1978: 341-3) so it is possible that 'her' female sex has been acquired by the influence

³ See Padraig O'Riain, e.g. : note 17, Part I, above; 'Traces of Lug in early Irish hagiographical tradition', *ZCP* 35 (1977), 138-56; 'Towards a methodology in Early Irish Hagiography', *Peritia* 1 (1982); and 'Some Bogus Irish Saints' in *Ainm* 3, 1-8 : "Largely due to fragmentation of originally single cults, large numbers of local and seemingly independent cults had indeed emerged."

of this typical assimilation to 'Helena', as we have suggested for saints like 'Elena', above. It might be argued that Elen's associations with things 'Roman' is simply another by-product of her assimilation to Helen but there are suggestions that this is something that goes rather deeper. Her association with the material remains of Roman civilisation was particularly strong and many of the Roman roads in Wales have been named after her, usually as 'Sarn Helen'. In fact it is her ubiquity in the toponymy that makes her association - or identification - with the saints 'Elen', or 'Helen', seem particularly likely: For instance one of the 'wells of Elen' is linked to her in local legend while another, in Caernarfon - with a chapel, recorded from the seventeenth century - (Gould: II, 258-9; F.Jones: 151, 190; Miller: 29, 57, 97) seems likely to be hers (see below), and shows that she could be regarded as a saint.

Meanwhile Elen's major literary manifestation is in the *Breuddwyd Maxen*, or *Dream of Maxen*, (Williams 1908; Jones, G&T 1949: 67-74) of the twelfth century but very likely 'the final culmination in literary form of traditional material which is very much older' (and "entirely uninfluenced by Geoffrey's account": Bromwich 1978: 342). In this Elen is associated, as wife, with the figure who is the epitome of all things 'Roman' in Welsh tradition: 'Maxen Wledig' (Bromwich: 451-4). However it is significant that Elen represents the 'British' half in a happy union between the Roman and British worlds. In the story she is firmly localised in North Wales but her specific localisation at 'the castle of Aber Seint' (Williams 1908: 9; Jones 1949: 71), Segontium Roman fort at Caernarfon, reflects again her association with the material remains of Roman civilisation in Britain: she is also associated in the tale with 'Caer Lleon', (City of the Legion) and 'Caer Fyrddin', 'Carmarthen', old Roman 'Moridunum' (Williams: 10-12; Jones: 72).

In fact, Elen as a figure of Welsh legend in general, is clearly not narrowly localised anywhere in the island : we have already noted her early association with Dyfed while in later Welsh legend her 'family' associations are with 'Cornish', or 'Dumnonian', figures traditionally associated with the British colonisation of Armorica, or Brittany.⁴ It

⁴ Elen's father is 'Eudaf Hen' and her brothers 'Cynan' and 'Gadeon'. The latter two are associated with the colonisation of Brittany in this tale, as is 'Conan Meriadocus' in the *Historia Regum* (V.14), where he is the son of 'Octavius', and in the *Life of St Goznou* (of 1017 ?). The late 14th c. Jesus MS 20 (Bartrum 1966: 45, no. 10) includes "Gadeon m. Cynan m. Eudaf Hen" in the dynastic line of Dumnonia. See Bromwich 1978: 316-8, 356-7.

might be significant that this tradition suggests a figure perceived as being from outside Wales - but still within 'Celtic' Britain. In fact 'Cernau', or 'Dumnonia' (which were often more or less synonymous) probably at one time covered a substantial part of Southern Britain. It represented to the Welsh all of Southern Celtic Britain that was not Wales and so any traditions once associated with the long-since Anglicised, Celtic Lowland Britain, might have become, in Welsh eyes, associated with the 'Cornish'. That 'Celtic Lowland Britain' had also been the more 'Romanised' part of Britain and so there is a kind of compatibility between Elen's 'Cornish' associations and her association with things 'Roman', or more specifically 'Roman-but-in-Britain' : 'Romano-British', in short. If 'Elen' derives from 'Alban' in the way that we are implying, then it is not too hard to imagine how a figure associated with the more Romanised Latin speakers of lowland Britain, and perhaps an earlier era when Britain had been more 'Roman', might have come to represent, to those on the Western periphery, everything that represented Roman civilisation in Britain - and so to become especially associated with its evocative material remains.

In this context the legend that appears in Henry of Huntingdon and Geoffrey of Monmouth (Bromwich: 341; *Historia Regum* V, 6; *Historia Anglorum* 37, 38), that makes Helen, the mother of Constantine, a Briton and the daughter of 'Coel' of Colchester, is highly significant. That this legend is based on the same native figure, 'Elen', that appears in our Welsh sources is strongly suggested by the fact that Henry records the legend that 'Helen' had built the walls of London and Colchester (not, surely, the kind of thing one would naturally associate with the Roman Emperor's mother): she shows therefore precisely the same kind of association with the material remains of Roman civilisation that we have noted in our Welsh figure. Had this legend been reported by Geoffrey then we might perhaps envisage the artificial transplantation of a figure of Brittonic Celtic legend into this different context but this is very unlikely to have been something perpetrated by Henry (whose account is the earlier of the two)⁵. It is also very difficult

⁵ Likewise one could suspect Geoffrey of having arbitrarily equated the 'Cole-' of 'Colecestra' with the 'Coel Hen' of Welsh legend, but Henry's 'Coel' seems more likely to reflect genuine local legend as the euheumerisation of the god represented in the Celtic river name 'Colne' (< *Colun* < *Col* + *guna* ?) as found in 'Colne ceastre', (so Ekwal 1928: 87-90) or in terms of which an original 'Colonia(-castra)' was reinterpreted (so

to imagine any process of diffusion of the legend from the Celtic West to the Anglo-Saxon South East (or vice versa), especially in a form that associated it with the local topography. One is forced to assume that the legend had its roots in the common Celtic past of both regions which would take its origins back to the post-Roman era (at least). We are implicitly recognising, here, an area of common Welsh/English heritage in terms of the cult beliefs and derivative legends that existed at probably the lowest levels of society and which had (probably over a prolonged period of contact) transcended the ethno-linguistic divide: or perhaps one should say 'resisted the process of Anglo-Saxon acculturation'.

It is particularly suggestive that London and Colchester, both of which have ancient churches dedicated to St Helen (Arnold-Forster: I. 181-9), lie within Wheeler's 'sub-Roman triangle' and so come very credibly within the orbit of a prestigious cult, based at Verulamium in sub-Roman times. That 'Helen' does not figure so prominently actually at St Albans might be explained by the fact that any British-derived cult figure, 'Elen', or 'Elven' would have been likely to have been (correctly) identified with, and absorbed by, the St Alban whose cult will have been revived (on the basis of learned, literary, tradition) by the abbey probably founded (or re-founded) there by Offa in the eighth century. At the same time the importance of the cult of St Helen in Yorkshire and the North East (see further V, below) need not conflict with our hypothesis that its popularity had to do with the conflation of the Roman empress with a native cult figure⁶ of (at one time) pan-British prestige: symbolic, therefore, of the island as a whole, and not just the South..

Elen Lluydawc's other major association, meanwhile, is the one expressed by her epithet: that is with the 'battle host', with war and things military. A passage from the *Breuddwyd Maxen* (Williams: 9, ll. 16-21; Jones: 72-3) links this with her association with Roman roads

Rivet: 312-3). The river name probably contained the same suffix as the river/divine name 'Alauna' (see IV, V below) and Coel Hen may have had a name based ultimately on the same theo/topo-nym (assimilated to Welsh *coel*, 'oath, trust').

⁶ Arnold-Forster 181-9. The church of St Helen's-on-the-Walls, York, with a primary focus on a mosaic roundel of a female head, seems to show the characteristic association of (H)elen with Roman remains and fortifications: J.R. Magilton, in *The Archaeology of York* 10/1, 1980.

and fortresses but also expresses it in a way that is especially suggestive in the light of our hypothesis :

‘Afterwards Elen thought to have highways built from one fortress to another across the island: these were built, and are now called the highways of Elen of the Hosts, because of her British origin - that is because the men of the island would not have assembled for anyone but her’.

The association expressed in her epithet, with the ‘battle-host’ and therefore defence’ is here specifically linked with the defence of the ‘island of Britain’. It is important that Elen is closely associated with Britain as a whole here: she seems to personify the whole island⁷. The point is, of course, that this is just what we have suggested for our cult figure Alban < Albio-. The cult of St Alban almost certainly was the most important one in fifth century Britain and we might expect, therefore, that, in any case, it would have become a ‘rallying point’ for the Britons in the disasters and dire emergencies that were associated with the Irish, Pictish and Saxon invasions: if our cult figure personified ‘Britain’ and was designed to promote pan-British unity in the way that we have suggested then this will have been all the more likely. Both what we know of early Celtic practice, and the later literature associated with the cults of the saints, strongly suggest that a dominant cult figure will have played such a role. It is very easy to imagine the ‘hosts’ of the British gathering under the banner of the martyr Alban as the Welsh were urged to do later under the banner of St David (Williams 1982: 10-11, l. 129) and as the European Celts had done earlier under golden standards of the Celtic equivalent to Athena, shortly after the Battle of Telamon in 225 B.C. (Polybius II.32). The match between the likely role of St Alban, as a cult-figure, in the post-Roman period and the way that ‘Elen Lluydauc’ is described here is highly suggestive: it is readily explicable in the terms of our hypothesis.

It remains true that, on the face of it, it would better suit our theory if we were dealing with an ‘Elven’ rather than an ‘Elen’, and if there were more likely Brittonic derivatives in ‘Elv-’ rather than just ‘El-’, but that is a point we shall return to in Parts IV and V.

⁷ Something not explained by the proposed derivation of ‘Elen’ from a corruption of ‘Yr Lleng’, ‘a (Roman) Legion’.

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