

Simeon of Durham's Annal for 756 and Govan, Scotland

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The annal for 756 preserved in the *Historia Regum* attributed to Simeon of Durham (flourished 1104–08) has been translated as follows:

King Eadberht, in the eighteenth year of his reign, and Angus, king of the Picts, led an army against the city of Dunbarton. Hence the Britons accepted terms there, on the first day of the month of August. But on the tenth day of the same month there perished almost the whole army which he led from *Ovania* to Newburgh, that is New City.¹

This record has been variously regarded. Jackson described Eadberht (737–58) as overwhelming the men of Strathclyde, so that English power in southern Scotland reached its high-water mark, when it seemed the English would absorb all Scotland south of Forth and Clyde. However, the day was saved by the ‘crushing defeat inflicted on Eadbert by the Britons as he was retiring from Dumbarton’, and the power-struggles in Northumbria that followed Eadberht’s death in 758.² Wainwright comments on Northumbria’s power in defeating the Britons at Dumbarton, but not on the subsequent fate of Eadberht’s army.³ Kirby describes Eadberht as joining forces with the formidable Angus son of Fergus to attack Dumbarton, ‘but immediately after—how we are not told—Eadberht’s army was unexpectedly destroyed.’⁴ Stenton notes merely that Eadberht’s wars temporarily arrested the decline of Northumbria, citing his conquest in about 752 of Kyle and other regions from the Britons of Strathclyde, and his attack with the king of the Picts on *Alcluith* (Dumbarton).⁵ Duncan

¹ *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, edited by D. Whitelock, 2nd edn (London, 1979), p. 266.

² K. H. Jackson, ‘The Britons in Southern Scotland’, *Antiquity*, 29 (1955), 77–88 (p. 85).

³ *The Problem of the Picts*, edited by F. T. Wainwright (Edinburgh, 1955), p. 8.

⁴ D. P. Kirby, *The Making of Early England* (London, 1967), p. 60.

⁵ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971), p. 92.

observes that, after the heavy losses of the Anglian army on 10 August 756 in unexplained circumstances, the pressures on Strathclyde were released and Northumbrian power declined, though there were English bishops at Whithorn until the end of the century and perhaps later.⁶ Hunter Blair states that Eadberht captured Dumbarton, the Strathclyde capital, but that these conquests were short-lived and Strathclyde later recovered much of its territory from the English.⁷

The purpose of this note is to try to identify *Ovania* and ‘Newburgh’. The second is clearly English; the first is not. It seems that ‘Newburgh’ is likely to be the modern Newbrough (Northumberland), some four miles north-west of Hexham, on the Roman road running parallel to Hadrian’s Wall. Newbrough would be a suitable place to station Northumbrian troops after service in Strathclyde, even though Ekwall gives the first attestation of Newbrough only from 1203 (*Nieweburc*).⁸ It is on a major line of communication; it guards the strategic Tyne Gap; it is close to Hexham, an important centre of Northumbrian power; it would be a natural base for forces returning from the Clyde.

Ovania is a more difficult problem. But, as it cannot be explained as an English place-name, it might be explained as a Cumbric one. The most likely explanation of it is as a corruption of **Govania*, which would seem to be a Latin form for Govan, in Lanarkshire. Govan, on the south bank of the Clyde, opposite the point where the river Kelvin joins it, is now a working-class district of Glasgow. Until its transformation by the building of shipyards in the last century, it was a small village. Yet it was also a focus of early Christianity in Strathclyde. Jackson and Thomas both comment on the ancient dedication of Govan church to the British saint, Constantine, perhaps the one whose conversion to the Lord is mentioned in the Welsh Annals for 589; Dickinson and Duncan recognize Govan as an early Scottish ecclesiastical centre.⁹ The name of Govan can be associated with

⁶ A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), p. 66.

⁷ P. Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1977), p. 47.

⁸ E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 339.

⁹ K. H. Jackson, ‘The sources for the Life of St Kentigern’, in *Studies in the Early British Church*, edited by N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 273–357 (p. 320); C. Thomas, ‘The evidence from North Britain’, in *Christianity in Britain*

Brittonic names cognate with Gaulish **gobann-* ‘smith’. Amongst these are the Welsh river-name Gafenni (as in Abergavenny), attested in British *Gobannium*, probably ‘fort on the river of the blacksmiths’ (or ‘of the ironworks’); the Middle Welsh personal name *Gofannon*, which occurs in the twelfth-century Four Branches of the Mabinogi; and the Old Breton personal name *Uuorgouan*.¹⁰ A Latin form of Govan could easily be *Govania*. As regards the suffix, we can compare *Menevia*, the Latin form of *Mynyw*, the former name of St Davids; *Landauia*, the Latin form of Llandaf; *Wintonia* ‘Caerwent’, attested in Asser; *Glastonia* ‘Glastonbury’, *Oxonia* ‘Oxford’, and so on.¹¹

If Simeon of Durham’s *Ovania* is to be identified as a form of **Govania*, which might mean ‘smithy’ or the like, it would accord with the progress of an English military campaign in Strathclyde as we can deduce it from the map.¹² Govan certainly existed as a settlement at this date. It is some ten miles from Dumbarton, on the other bank of the Clyde. It would, therefore, be a natural place for a Northumbrian army to withdraw to, after the negotiations that concluded the siege of Dumbarton. Govan was not far from Dumbarton, but far enough to avoid clashes. It also suits the logic of the statement recorded by Simeon of Durham, in which *Ovania* must be the place where Eadberht’s troops began their withdrawal to their destination at ‘Newburgh’. Both these places lie close to or on Roman roads, on which English soldiers would march south to Carlisle and then east.

Exactly how *Ovania* might be read for **Govania* is more problematic. In scripts of this period, **g** and **o** are usually quite distinct. It may thus be more to the point to note that in Brittonic, initial *g* is lost in soft mutation, which occurs for proper nouns in genitival relationship after feminine singular nouns. In Welsh, for example, we have Gwent, but Caer-went, and

300–700, edited by M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (Leicester, 1968), pp. 93–121 (p. 110); W. Croft Dickinson and A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1977), p. 415.

¹⁰ R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Cardiff, 1938), pp. 143–45; D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 350–51; A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, 1979), p. 369.

¹¹ *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, edited by A. W. Wade-Evans (Cardiff, 1944), pp. 88 and 238; S. D. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 271.

¹² See the Ordnance Survey *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages*, 2nd edn (Southampton, 1966).

Gwrangon, but *Caerwraŋon* ‘Worcester’. The sixth-century Cumbrian hero *Gwenddolau* gave his name to *Carwinley* (*Karwindelhov* 1202), a settlement some nine miles north of Carlisle, with the initial *g* of *Gwenddolau* being lenited (to zero) after Cumbric **cair* (fem.).¹³ We may also note the form *kaer ofanhon* ‘Caer Gofannon’ in the *Book of Taliesin*, again with lenition of initial *g* after *caer*.¹⁴ Now, *caer* in Welsh means ‘city, fortress’, but the Cumbric equivalent giving *Car-* might mean any small hamlet or a manor-house and farm, originally protected by some kind of defensive stockade, as is also the case with Breton *Ker-*. Jackson observes that ‘the map of Brittany bristles with such names in *Ker-*’; hence the Cumberland names *Cardurnock* ‘pebbly-place settlement’, *Cardew* ‘dark settlement’.¹⁵ Since it is highly unlikely that *Govan* lacked defences, a by-form **Cair-ovan* might have existed, which would produce Latin *Ovania* if the prefix was regarded as a separable element. In this context it is interesting to note the various Welsh names for *Dumbarton*. In Old Welsh this was called *Al(t) Clut* ‘Clyde Rock’, but other early sources call it *din Al Clud*, *caer Al Clut*, *din Clut*, and *caer Glut*.¹⁶ If there were variant names for *Dumbarton*, there might be similar variants for *Govan*, ten miles away. If so, we need not assume corruption in *Simeon of Durham*’s text.

If the identification of *Ovania* with *Govan* and ‘Newburgh’ with *Newbrough* proposed above is accepted, we see more clearly the circumstances of the English withdrawal of August 756, when disaster overtook *Eadberht*’s troops somewhere between *Clyde* and *Tyne*. Perhaps they were ambushed by British troops at an unknown place in the *Border Hills*, while they were still far from the safety of *Carlisle*.

¹³ A. M. Armstrong and others, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 20–22 (Cambridge, 1950–52), I, 52.

¹⁴ J. Lloyd-Jones, *Geirfa Barddoniaeth Gynnar Gymraeg* (Cardiff, 1931–63), pp. 96 and 545; *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, edited by R. Bromwich, 2nd edn (Cardiff, 1978), p. 379.

¹⁵ K. H. Jackson, ‘Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria’, in *Angles and Britons. O’Donnell Lectures*, edited by H. Lewis (Cardiff, 1963), pp. 60–84 (pp. 80–81).

¹⁶ K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin. The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 76. *Dumbarton* was not called *Arecluta*, as is stated, wrongly, in *Culhwch and Olwen. An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, edited by R. Bromwich and D. S. Evans (Cardiff, 1992), p. 128. *Arecluta* was the *Clyde valley*, as correctly shown on *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages*.