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Notes and Comments

AU 729.2 and the last years of Nechtan mac Der-Ilei

In a recent article in this journal Professor Thomas Clancy alluded in passing to an alternative translation of an entry in the Annals of Ulster concerning the latter part of the career of Nechtan mac Der-Ilei which I had suggested to him.¹ Having been ‘flushed out’ in this fashion I feel obliged to make the alternative translation public and to discuss briefly some of its implications. The passage in question is as follows:

*Bellum Monith Carno iuxta Stagnum Loogde inter hostem Nectain 7 exercitum Oengusa 7 exactatores Nectain ceciderunt; hoc est: Biceot m. Moneit 7 filius eius, Finguine m. Drostain, Feroth m. Finnguine 7 quidam multi, 7 familia Oengussa triumphavit.*²

This is translated by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, following earlier editors, as:

The battle of Monid Carno near Loch Laegde between the hosts of Nectan and the army of Aengus, and Nectan’s exactors fell i.e. Biceot son of Monet, and his son, Finnguine son of Drostan, Feroth son of Finnguine, and many others; and the adherents of Aengus were triumphant.³

A. O. Anderson, in his gargantuan *Early Sources of Scottish History*, represented the same passage thus:

The battle of Monith-Carno, near lake Loogdae, [took place] between the army of Nechtan and the army of Angus; and Nechtan’s tax gatherers fell, namely Biceot, son of Moneit, and his son; Finguine, son of Drostan; Feroth, son of Finguine, and many others: and the family of Angus triumphed.⁴

The passage has been interpreted as marking the end of a second brief reign by King Nechtan following his re-emergence from the monastery

¹ T. O. Clancy, ‘Philosopher-king: Nechtan mac Der-Ilei’, *SHR* 83 (2004) 125-49 at 136 n.48, 144 n.74 and 146 n.80. I had communicated my suggestion to him via e-mail some months previously.

² AU 729.2.

³ Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed.), *Annals of Ulster to A.D. 1131, Part I: Text and Translation* (Dublin, 1983), 183.

⁴ A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1922 and Stamford, 1990), i. 225-6. Anderson used, and closely followed, W. M. Hennessy (ed.), *Annala Uladh, Annals of Ulster: otherwise Annala Senait, Annals of Senat: a chronicle of Irish affairs from A.D. 431 to A.D. 1540*, 4 vols (Dublin, 1887-1901), i. 180-2.

to which he had apparently been consigned in 724, or the prison where he had been sent by his successor, Drust, two years later.⁵ It has also been taken as clear evidence that the apparent alliance between Nechtan and ‘Oengus’ (the future Pictish king Onuist son of Uргуист) that had led to Nechtan’s restoration to the kingship had broken down.⁶

Our understanding of this entry depends very heavily on our understanding of two words, *hostem* and *exact[at]ores*.⁷ In all the published translations the first word has been rendered as ‘army’ and the second, though left untranslated by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, has been interpreted by most commentators as meaning something like tax- or tribute-gatherers. One cautious note was sounded by Marjorie Anderson who, after following the traditional interpretation in the main text of her *Kings and Kingship*, added a footnote which reads:

It is fair to point out the ambiguities in AU. *Hostis* could be “enemy” (though *inimicus* is the word we should expect) and *exactores* could be “expellers”. These interpretations would produce a totally different story.⁸

Indeed; and it is the purpose of the present note to argue that these alternative interpretations are the more credible. The word *hostis* is practically unknown elsewhere in the Irish chronicles.⁹ The only other usage I have been able to identify occurs in the Annals of Tigernach, under the year corresponding to AU 685, which contain the following passage, a citation from Bede’s *Chronica Maiora*:

Gisulphus dux gentis Long[o]bardorum Bene<u>en(n)ti Campaniam ighne, gladio et ca<pt>iuitate uastau[it], cumque non esset qui eius impetuū resisteret, apostolic<u>s papa Iohan[n]és, qui Sergio success<s>erat, mis[s]is ad e[um] sacerdotibus ac dona<ri>is perpluri<mis>, uniuers<o>s redemi<t> capti<u>os atque ho[s]tes domum redire feci<t>. Cui success[s]it al(i)ius Iohannes, qui inter multa operum illustrium fecit oratorium sancte Dei genitricis, opere pulcher<rim>ó intra e(x)cl<e>siam beati <a>pos<to>lí Petri.¹⁰

⁵ Anderson, *Early Sources*, i. 226 n.1, for the interpretation, and AT 724 and AU 726.1 for the retreat into religion and imprisonment.

⁶ Alex Woolf, ‘Onuist son of Uргуист: *tyrannus carnifex* or a David for the Picts?’, in D. Hill and M. Worthington (ed.), *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 383 (Oxford, 2005), 35-42 at 36.

⁷ The second word appears as *exactatores* in MS A of AU but *exactores* in MS B.

⁸ M. O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1973; 2nd edn Edinburgh, 1980), 178 n.226. This note has had surprisingly little impact on the scholarship and, indeed, I only stumbled across it well into the process of preparing this note.

⁹ Searching the vocabulary used in these texts has been made immeasurably easier by the resources made available by University College Cork’s *Celt* project accessible at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/>.

¹⁰ Whitley Stokes, ‘The Annals of Tigernach: third fragment’, *Revue celtique* 17 (1896) 79-223, at 208-9. Square brackets are as in Stokes’ edition; angled brackets signify Stokes’ emendations; round brackets signify letters omitted by Stokes (all according to the apparatus in Stokes’ edition). The passage reads, in translation: ‘Gisulf, *dux* of the Langobard *gens* in Benevento laid waste Campania with fire and sword. Because there was nobody who could resist his onslaught the apostolic pope, John, who had succeeded Sergius, sent priests to him and very many gifts; he redeemed all the

Bede produced *Chronica Maiora* ca 725 so that this usage is almost exactly contemporary with the events described in AU 729.2. Here the meaning of *hostes* is clearly ‘enemy’ and this meaning occurs with regularity throughout Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*.¹¹ *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* cites multiple, though not exhaustive, examples of *hostis* as ‘enemy’, but only one example, from a letter of Alcuin, of its use for ‘army’.¹² The word occurs once in the Adomnán’s life of Saint Columba, interestingly in the account of Oswald’s victory over Caedualla.¹³

It is of course curious that *hostis* appears nowhere else in the early medieval Irish chronicle-record, and this in itself may suggest that the entry for AU 729.2 may not have originated within the Iona Chronicle, although this must remain conjecture.¹⁴ Marjorie Anderson’s suggestion that *inimicus* was the more normal word for ‘enemy’ in this context does not appear to be born out by the evidence. This word also appear to be used only once in the chronicle-record at AU 1063.3 in the notice of the death of three Irish dynasts.¹⁵ It seems fair to conclude that in AU 729.2 it is likely was that *hostem* was intended as the accusative singular of *hostis*—‘enemy’. The first part of the entry, reading *Bellum Monith Carno iuxta Stagnum Loogde inter hostem Nectain 7 exercitum Oengusa*, should thus be translated: ‘[t]he Battle of Monith Carno, by Loch Loogde, between the enemy of Nechtan and the army of Oengus’.

The problematic word in the second part of the sentence is less easy to interpret. *Exactatores* appear to be a *hapax legomenon*. It is usually taken to be an error for *exactores*, a noun deriving from the verb *exigere* which can mean (as we have seen) either ‘expeller’, or an ‘exacter’ (either of a penalty or of revenue or dues). Neither *exactator* nor *exactor* appears elsewhere in the Irish chronicle-record nor in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The word *exactor*, however, does appear thirteen times in the Vulgate. In Exodus it is the word used for ‘slave drivers’ during the Egyptian captivity,¹⁶ and once, at XX.xxv:

Si pecuniam mutuam dederis populo meo pauperi qui habitat tecum, non urgebis eum quasi exactor, nec usuris opprimes.

¹⁰ (*Continued*) captives and made the enemy return home. He was succeeded by another John, who, among other great works, built an oratory to the Holy Mother of God, the most beautiful of works, within the church of the blessed apostle Peter.’

¹¹ Puttnam Fennel Jones, *A Concordance to the Historia Ecclesiastica of Bede* (Cambridge, MA., 1929), 244-5.

¹² R. E. Latham and D. R. Howlett (ed.), *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Oxford, 1975-), i. 1180.

¹³ Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, I.i., A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (ed. & trans.), *Adomnan’s Life of Columba* (Edinburgh, 1961, 2nd edn, Oxford, 1991), 14.

¹⁴ For the Iona Chronicle lying behind the *Annals of Ulster*; and other Irish chronicles, at this point see John Bannerman, ‘Notes on the Scottish entries in the early Irish annals’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 11 (1968) 149-170, reprinted in J. Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dabriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), 9-26. It is tempting to see Bedan influence in this usage. Is this passage a sole surviving fragment of an **Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Pictorum*? Probably not.

¹⁵ Thanks are due once more to UCC’s online resource site <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/>.

¹⁶ Exodus V.vi., V.x. and V.xiv.

Here the traditional translation is ‘money-lender’, but a more general sense of ‘oppressor’ could be read into the phrase.¹⁷ This reading is born out by subsequent uses of the word, particularly in Job, Isaiah and Zachariah.¹⁸ In Luke the word is used for a gaoler.¹⁹ Without other early Insular comparanda the Vulgate reading is probably the best indicator of what this word would have meant to the author of our text. Rather than exercise ourselves over whether we should read *exact[at]ores* as ‘expellers’ or ‘tax gatherers’, we are able to cut the Gordian knot with reference to the Vulgate and translate the second portion of the sentence, *7 exactatores Nectain ceciderunt; hoc est: Biceot m. Moneit 7 filius eius, Finguine m. Drostain, Feroth m. Finguine 7 quidam multi, 7 familia Oengussa triumphavit*, as follows; ‘and the oppressors of Nechtan were slain; that is: Biceot son of Monet, Finguine son of Drostan, Feroth son of Finguine and many others, and the *familia* of Oengus triumphed’.

The implications of this reading of the text are that Nechtan mac Der-Ilei’s second reign did not end with a rebellion by Oengus/Onuist in 729 but continued until his own death in 732,²⁰ still placing him on the throne while Bede put the finishing touches to his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

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¹⁷ ‘If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like an *oppressor*, charge him no interest.’

¹⁸ Job III. xviii and XXXIX.vii, Isaiah III.xii, IX.iv, XIV.ii and XIV.iv, and Zachariah IX.viii and X.iv.

¹⁹ Luke XII.lviii.

²⁰ AT 732.