

# Cultural Heroism in the Old North of Britain: The Evidence of Aneirin's *Gododdin*

*Helen Fulton*

The period between the fifth and seventh centuries AD, from the departure of the Romans from Britain in 410 AD to the consolidation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, is sometimes referred to as the British Heroic Age. Drawing on the famous literary category defined by the Chadwicks in their monumental work, *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, 1932), the concept of the 'Heroic Age' in Britain describes the struggle of the British kingdoms in the west and north to resist the gradual expansion of the Anglo-Saxons, and the ultimate absorption of the northern kingdoms into Anglian territories.

Always on the margins of Roman influence in Britain, the British kingdoms in the west and north evolved during the fifth century into independent principalities, surviving among the fragmented remains of Romanised Britain. Native kings and princes, descendants of ancient Celtic dynasties, adapted Roman institutions and administrative structures in order to re-assert their power as independent rulers, and a web of these small states, often hostile to each other but fundamentally united by language and culture, stretched from Cornwall in the south-west, through Wales, and up into the Old North, roughly the area between the Roman walls, Hadrian's and the Antonine.<sup>1</sup>

The ultimate success of the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain was assured by their victory in battles which ruptured the chain of British kingdoms - the battle of Dyrham in Gloucestershire in 577 AD, when the

---

<sup>1</sup> For an account of this period and the nature of the British kingdoms, see Nora Chadwick, *The British Heroic Age: The Welsh and the Men of the North*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976); S. Frere, *Britannia*, (London, 1967); N.K. Chadwick (ed.), *Celt and Saxon, Studies in the Early British Border*, (Cambridge, 1963); N.K. Chadwick (ed.), *Studies in Early British History*, (Cambridge, 1954); Kenneth Jackson, *Angles and Britons*, (Cardiff, 1963); H.M. Chadwick, *Early Scotland*, (Cambridge, 1949).

Saxons broke through to the Severn, effectively separating the Britons of Devon and Cornwall from their fellows in Wales, and the battle of Chester in 613 AD, which further isolated the northern British kingdoms from those in Wales. By the end of the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxons had colonised northern Britain, and the surviving British tribes were contained within Wales, the land of the *wealhas*, the 'foreigners'.

Historical evidence for fifth- and sixth-century Britain is not plentiful. The only contemporary evidence is the chronicle of Gildas (c.495-570), *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, which represents the position of Romano-British Christianity in deploring the transfer of government from civil to military leaders and the escalation of militarism which followed the withdrawal of the Romans from Britain. Later historical sources which throw some light on this shadowy period of British history include Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* of about 800 AD, and the *Annales Cambriae*, compiled about 1100, both of which were probably drawing on a lost northern British chronicle as one of their sources. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written in 731, also refers to events in the fifth and sixth centuries and describes the Anglian king Aethelfrith of Bernicia (592-616) conquering British territories in the Old North.

In addition to these Latin historical sources, there are two medieval manuscripts containing poetry in Welsh which dates from at least the ninth century and is possibly much older. The *Book of Taliesin*, compiled in the late thirteenth century, contains among a collection of medieval material a core of early poems attributed to a sixth-century poet, Taliesin. Apparently a court poet composing for a number of British rulers in Wales and the Old North, Taliesin later became the subject of folklore and fantasy verse as a wizard-like shape-shifter whose adventures are recorded in the sixteenth-century *Chwedl Taliesin*.<sup>2</sup>

The *Book of Aneirin*, a manuscript compiled in the mid-thirteenth-century, contains a long series of verse stanzas which apparently comprise a single elegiac lament for the warriors of the tribe of Gododdin. Located in what is now eastern Scotland, around modern Edinburgh, the Gododdin were known to the Romans as the Votadini, and were one of the independent British principalities of the Old North, along with Rheged (Cumbria) and Strathclyde, which eventually fell to the Angles over a period of some centuries.<sup>3</sup> These two manuscripts represent almost the total surviving literature in Welsh of the British 'heroic age'.

2 On Taliesin and the early poetry, see Ifor Williams and J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1968).

3 The kingdom of the Gododdin probably collapsed when its capital, Edinburgh, was captured by Oswald, king of Northumbria, in 638. See Kenneth Jackson's articles, "The Britons in Southern Scotland", *Antiquity* xxix (1955), and "Edinburgh and the Anglian Occupation of Lothian" in *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies Presented to Bruce Dickins*, edited by Peter Clemoes (London, 1959), pp.35-

The historical significance of the poems is difficult to assess accurately because of doubts surrounding their original date of composition. There is some evidence that both Taliesin and the poet of the *Gododdin*, Aneirin, were known as historical figures of the sixth century. They are named by Nennius in the *Historia Brittonum* as two of a group of British poets who were famous 'at the time of king Ida of Northumbria', which would place them in the mid-sixth century.<sup>4</sup> The Taliesin poems refer to known historical leaders of the period, such as Urien the king of Rheged, and Cynan Garwyn the ruler of Powys in eastern Wales, and they construct an authentic sixth-century context of battles between British and Saxons, British and Picts, and the cultural unity between Wales and the Old North which existed before the battle of Chester in 613.

The work of Aneirin is harder to locate in a contemporary historical context. It refers to a battle between the men of the *Gododdin*, supplemented by other British troops, and the Anglians of Bernicia and Deira (later united as the kingdom of Northumbria). Such a battle could well have taken place in the latter half of the sixth century, though there is no record of this particular encounter which, according to the poem, took place at Catraeth (probably Catterick in Yorkshire), where the British troops were annihilated by the Anglians.<sup>5</sup>

Following the important work by Sir Ifor Williams on the dating of the language of the *Gododdin*, it was accepted by most scholars that the poem was a genuine sixth-century composition, despite problems locating it in a precise historical context - for example, Urien of Rheged is not mentioned in the poem though he must have lived at about the same time as the battle of Catraeth, and in fact one of the Taliesin poems refers to Urien as the

---

42. The kingdom of Rheged was also extinguished during the first half of the seventh century, while Strathclyde survived longer, its dynasty finally dying out in the early eleventh century. See Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men. Scotland A.D. 80-1000*, (London, 1984), pp.175-238.

4 Thomas Charles-Edwards warns that 'we cannot...depend on the precise *floruit* assigned to Aneirin in the *Historia Brittonum*, for that may be no more than ninth-century guesswork', and he concludes that Aneirin's *floruit* falls between c.550 and c.640. See "The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*: An Historian's View" in *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd. Studies in Old Welsh Poetry*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and R. Brinley Jones, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978), pp.44-71, especially p.63. See also the Introduction to A.O.H. Jarman's edition and translation, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*. (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1988), pp.xiv-xvii, for a description of the manuscript and the A and B texts.

5 Most of the work of retrieving the historical context of the battle of Catraeth has been done by Kenneth Jackson, whose conclusions are set out in the comprehensive introduction to his edition and translation of the poem, *The Gododdin. The Oldest Scottish Poem*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1969). However, David Dumville has since pointed out the difficulties of locating the events of the poem in a precise historical context, and remarks that Kenneth Jackson's reconstruction of the historical context "is almost wholly a work of imagination". See "Early Welsh Poetry: Problems of Historicity" in *Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin*, edited by Brynley F. Roberts, (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1988), pp.1-16, especially p.4.

ruler of Catraeth.<sup>6</sup> It is also clear from the manuscript that the poem has been transcribed by at least two different hands belonging to two different chronological periods, producing the "A version" and the earlier "B version", with some verses occurring in both versions.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of more recent work on the manuscript itself, on the metrics of the poem, and on the historical evidence, some scholars are keeping more open minds regarding the date of the poem. Thomas Charles-Edwards suggests that the poem as it survives preserves the authentic work of Aneirin, who lived probably between 550 and 640, with additional material from later reciters and poets, particularly the 'reciter's preface', which attributes the poem to Aneirin, and a stanza commemorating the battle of Strathcarron, which took place in 642.<sup>8</sup> Following Aneirin's death, the poem may have been recited by poets in Strathclyde after the fall of Gododdin, mourning the loss of a British kingdom to the English.<sup>9</sup> David Dumville argues for an early date of composition, perhaps as early as the 540s, but warns that even the historical existence of Taliesin and Aneirin as sixth-century poets is open to doubt.<sup>10</sup>

Setting aside the problems regarding the exact date of composition of both the Taliesin poems and Aneirin's work, they can still be read as constructs of a historical context in which small British kingdoms in Wales and the Old North were fighting for survival against the advancing Anglo-Saxons. As such, they provide valuable evidence concerning the material culture and ideology of a British warrior class which represents for many modern readers the expression of a 'British Heroic Age'.

---

6 Kenneth Jackson explains Urien's absence by suggesting he had died before the battle of Catraeth took place (*The Gododdin*, pp.11-12). For the reference to Urien in Taliesin's poetry, see Ifor Williams and J.E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, II and VIII.

7 This distinction between the A and B versions of the poem was first made by Ifor Williams in his original edition of the poem, *Canu Aneirin*, (Cardiff, 1938). For a description of the manuscript and the two main scribal hands, see Jackson, *The Gododdin*, pp. 41-46, and Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*, pp. xiv-xvii. The two versions are discussed further by Brendan O Hehir, "What is the *Gododdin*?", in *Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin*, pp. 57-95.

8 This is stanza 102 in the edition of the poem by A.O.H. Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*. All subsequent references are to this edition. In a note on the stanza, Jarman says: "This stanza celebrates the defeat and death in 642, at the battle of Strathcarron near Falkirk, of Domnall Brecc or Dyfnwal Frych (D. the Freckled), king of Scottish Dal Riada, at the hands of the Britons of Strathclyde.....Though not connected with the theme of *Y Gododdin*, it was interpolated into both A and B texts" (p 151).

9 "The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*", pp.54-65. The assumption that the poem was recited in Strathclyde is based on the theory that the Strathcarron stanza originated in Strathclyde in the mid-seventh century and was added to Aneirin's poem. But David Dumville has challenged this theory, suggesting that the Strathcarron stanza is probably later than the battle itself and may have been added in to the text of the *Gododdin* during its transmission in Wales. See "Early Welsh Poetry: Problems of Historicity", p.7.

10 "Early Welsh Poetry: Problems of Historicity", p.8.

The meaning of 'heroic' and 'heroic age' in this context derives directly from the historical model of literature defined first by H.M. Chadwick in *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912) and later by both H.M. and Nora K. Chadwick in their seminal work *The Growth of Literature* (vol. I, Cambridge, 1932). This book, which attempted a comparative study of primarily oral literatures, defined a 'British' or 'Welsh' heroic age, analogous to that of the Teutonic peoples, on the evidence of the 'heroic' poetry of Taliesin and Aneirin.<sup>11</sup> They therefore located the 'British Heroic Age' in the sixth century AD.

The 'heroic age' of literature, as defined by the Chadwicks, is understood as being primarily a Greek and Teutonic concept. The evidence of Greek, Norse and English literature is used to construct the idea of a historical period called the Heroic Age which occurred independently in classical Greece and later among the Teutonic peoples of the fourth to sixth centuries AD. Anglo-Saxon heroic literature of the seventh and eighth centuries (such as *Beowulf*) is a later manifestation of the Teutonic Heroic Age.

The Heroic Age common to Greek and Teutonic history is defined as "an age famous in literature or tradition, in which heroic conditions are predominant"<sup>12</sup>, and the "antecedent conditions" which give rise to the Heroic Age include "emancipation, social, political and religious, from the bonds of tribal law"<sup>13</sup> and "the development of an irresponsible type of kingship resting upon military prestige".<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the discussions in both *The Heroic Age* and *The Growth of Literature*, an analogous 'British Heroic Age' is deduced from the evidence of early Welsh poetry. Even though "there are no heroic poems [in Welsh] corresponding to the Greek and Teutonic narrative poems",<sup>15</sup> while the elegies and panegyrics typical of early Welsh literature are unparalleled in Greek and Teutonic heroic poetry,<sup>16</sup> the notion of a 'British Heroic Age' corresponding to the Greek and Teutonic concept is accepted as a historical fact.

There are a number of problems with the Chadwicks' construction of a universal European 'Heroic Age'. Literary texts describing 'heroic conditions' are used to reconstruct an apparent historical reality, the 'heroic age', whose social customs, forms of government and religion are all deduced from the evidence of the texts themselves. Heroic literature, by a

---

<sup>11</sup> *Growth of Literature*, vol. I, p.16.

<sup>12</sup> *Growth of Literature*, vol. I, p.11.

<sup>13</sup> *Heroic Age*, p.443.

<sup>14</sup> *Heroic Age*, p.442.

<sup>15</sup> *Growth of Literature*, vol. I, p.34.

<sup>16</sup> The Chadwicks call the Welsh verse 'celebration poetry' (*Growth of Literature*, vol. I, p.42).

kind of circular argument, is then viewed as the product of this 'heroic age', whereas the texts are actually used to construct it in the first place.

A related difficulty is the failure to define the term 'heroic', which is used persistently as if its meaning were absolute and self-evident. Heroic literature concerns the activities of heroes, and no further explanation is offered. The concept of 'heroism' is further universalised by the assumption that one 'heroic age' is very like another, and that cultural and literary differences are minimised by the overriding similarities of 'heroic' societies.

This tendency to universalise is particularly evident in the treatment of the word *comitatus*, which is used as a kind of generic term for all heroic war-bands.<sup>17</sup> A social structure in which kings or chieftains and their *comitatus* predominate is assumed to represent the typical 'heroic society', in which a "transfer of power from kindred to *comitatus*" has taken place.<sup>18</sup> Leaving aside the fact that kindred and *comitatus* were often one and the same group in tribal societies, there is also the problem that the Germanic *comitatus* (as defined by Tacitus in his descriptive treatise *Germania*) was specific to Germanic societies and is not necessarily directly transferable to other cultures. To use it as a generic term suggests a degree of uniformity about the nature of 'heroic' societies which supports the idea of a 'Heroic Age' but which is not convincingly established.

H.M. Chadwick's discussion of the 'antecedent conditions' common to every 'heroic age' focuses on the rise to power of the generic *comitatus* at the expense of tribal bonds, and the subsequent instability of heroic societies because of the "absence of nationalism".<sup>19</sup> He attributes the development of this social structure to the influence of Roman civilization - which he sees as literally 'civilized' - on the "semi-civilized kingdoms" with which it came into contact.<sup>20</sup>

---

17 The word *comitatus*, meaning a warband or group of men following a chieftain, is of course Latin, used by Tacitus to describe this particular social institution among Germanic tribes in his work *Germania*. However, no similar description of the *comitatus* and its social function exists in early Germanic sources, and there is no single surviving Germanic word corresponding to *comitatus*, which is why the Latin word is used to describe a Germanic institution. John Lindow has shown that the Germanic root \**druhtiz*, from which Old English *gedryht* and Old Norse *drott* are derived, corresponds to Tacitus's use of *comitatus*, but the various cognates are not entirely synonymous: *gedryht* is a fairly 'neutral' term for a 'band of men', whereas *drott* refers specifically to a warband. See *Comitatus, Individual and Honor, Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary*, (University of California Publications in Linguistics vol. 83, Berkeley, 1976), pp.10-41. In their construction of a 'Heroic Age' based on the model of the *comitatus*, the Chadwicks have therefore followed Tacitus's description as if it were a unified Germanic institution, whereas the linguistic evidence suggests it had cultural variants even within Germanic society, let alone in other linguistic cultures.

18 *Heroic Age*, p.443.

19 *Heroic Age*, p.461.

20 *Ibid.*

A major problem here - apart from those raised by concepts such as 'nationalism' and 'civilization' - is the failure to acknowledge that this notion of a 'heroic age' rests entirely on the surviving literature of the dominant social group, generally the dual patriarchal hegemony of a militaristic aristocracy and a learned literate class. It is the similar concerns of such a power-base which produce similar kinds of literature, not the apparent pervasiveness of a generic *comitatus* or a universal 'heroism'.

The purpose of dominant-class literature is to reinforce the values and ideals of the ruling class. By calling this literature 'heroic', the Chadwicks imply that any rightfully-ruling military aristocracy is by its nature 'heroic'. At the same time, non-aristocratic (non-heroic) sections of society are excluded from the Chadwickian 'Heroic Age': the compilers and users of the Anglo-Saxon charms and riddles, for example, are apparently not considered 'heroic', and yet these texts are contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon 'Heroic Age' of *Beowulf*. The obvious conclusion is that 'heroism' is the prerogative of a social class, and not the defining element of a historical context, as the Chadwicks present it.

All these difficulties are related to the theoretical problem of the relationship between literature and 'reality'. The Chadwickian position clearly presupposes a relationship in which literature 'mirrors' or 'reflects' the society which produces it, so that a literature which celebrates the values of the aristocratic warrior is merely reflecting a social reality in which such values were important. This position also tends to view all literature from a 'realistic' perspective, as if it all conformed to the practices of the nineteenth-century realist tradition, in which clearly individualised authors attempted to express 'truths' about their society which readers were invited to recognise as universally 'true' of human nature in general.<sup>21</sup> For the Chadwicks, the 'heroic age' of literature represents a universal statement about (male) heroism, reflecting the social reality of the generic *comitatus* culture.

More recent critical approaches interpret texts (literary or otherwise) as constructs which encode ideological assumptions, and in their turn construct a 'real world' in which these assumptions are clearly true. The Chadwickian position then becomes more a statement about the Chadwicks' own preoccupations with the concepts of nationalism, civilization and male heroism in war-dominated societies (such as England between the wars) than an authentic reconstruction (even if such a thing were possible) of an historical context. In other words, the Chadwickian

---

21 On this kind of reading practice, see Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, (Methuen, London, New York, 1980); Antony Easthope, *Literary Into Cultural Studies*, (London, New York, 1991), pp.3-21.

'Heroic Age' is a twentieth-century ideal deriving its definitions of 'heroism' from the English officer class of World War I. In the introduction to his edition of the *Gododdin*, Jarman recounts an anecdote about the Battle of the Somme in 1916 in order to illustrate the 'heroic ideal' in 'real life'.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of pre-medieval Britain, the Germanic 'Heroic Age' of the Anglo-Saxons, dominated by the generic *comitatus*, has come, by a process of cultural imperialism, to be synonymous with the Heroic Age of the whole of Britain. But just as the term 'Heroic Age' is a convenient construct, so the dominance of the Germanic tradition in British literary criticism (continuing up until the present day) is a convenient way of streamlining the British literary tradition so that it comprises only one language, only one cultural inheritance. Simultaneously with the 'heroic' literature of the Anglo-Saxons, there existed the identically 'heroic' literature of the native British inhabitants, a literature whose persistent marginalisation by English scholars is perfectly exemplified by its inclusion, as a special category, within the Chadwickian 'Heroic Age' of Anglo-Saxon England.

For the Chadwicks, then, and for others who follow their model, 'heroic' literature unproblematically celebrates virtues and ideals which are universally 'heroic' and characteristic of 'heroes'. But it is also possible to read the literature as itself constructing a concept of heroism which serves a particular social function, namely to assert the continuing power of the ruling ('heroic') class through warfare and military subjugation, and to marginalise the attributes and achievements of other social groups. The very term 'heroic', as used by twentieth-century critics like the Chadwicks, depends on modern connotations of the word ('the heroes of Passchaendale') in order to privilege one kind of literature, the 'heroic', over the 'non-heroic' (where it survives), such as the Anglo-Saxon charms and riddles or the Welsh genealogies. 'Heroic' literature is synonymous with 'great' literature, which is itself a euphemism for the literature of the dominant class.

To say the *Gododdin* is a 'heroic' poem, then, is to say nothing more than that it is an expression of a ruling-class culture in the context of military activity. Dominant groups whose power depends on military strength are likely to value 'heroic' behaviour on the battlefield as a way of encouraging men to fight, a point not lost on the poets of the first World War, such as Wilfred Owen who repeated the proud and ancient claim of Horace in a spirit of bitter irony: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" ('it is a sweet and proper thing to die for one's country'). But there are

---

<sup>22</sup> *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*, p. xlvi.



further implications in terms of locating Welsh literature in the mainstream. By describing the *Gododdin* as 'heroic' literature, the poem, often marginalised by mainstream medieval studies, is appropriated into the same orbit as other, more famous, examples of 'heroic' literature, such as *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*. Its differences from the narrative heroic tradition then work to isolate the poem within the framework of 'heroic age' literature, constructing it as generically alien from the 'norm' and therefore returning it to its marginal position.

The 'heroic values' celebrated in the *Gododdin* - ferocity, rashness, nobility, loyalty - are the values of a military power-group and are therefore culture-specific rather than universal in the way that the Chadwicks suggest. Such values are recognised as 'heroic', rather than as foolish, barbaric, wasteful or tragic, by audiences whose world-view accepts a militaristic ruling class as inevitable and desirable. 'Heroism', like all value-systems, is highly specific and only appears to be 'universal' insofar as militarised hegemonies have dominated the political histories of Western cultures. If there were a universally-recognised 'heroism', it would not have been possible for Wilfred Owen to refer to Horace's assertion of patriotism as 'the great Lie'.

The 'heroism' of the men of *Gododdin* as a class-based and culture-specific ethic is clear from the recurrent themes of the whole poem (including both the A version and the older B version). The form of the poem itself, comprising a series of stanzas naming individual warriors, resembles the 'listing device' of early Welsh and Irish literature, as in the Irish *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, the Welsh tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, and the Welsh 'Stanzas of the Graves', where individual warriors are listed as a means of emphasising the size, power and nobility of an army. In terms of its structure, the poem is connected intertextually to other Celtic texts describing warrior power-groups.

The poem explicitly attests to the high status of the warriors, by references to their horses, armour, accoutrements and other material goods, making an implicit connection between martial aggression and high social status. The warriors of the *Gododdin* wore brooches and torques and gold and purple clothing (see stanza 17, for example), they rode powerful horses and carried shields and swords. If Kenneth Jackson is right and the poem celebrates only the three hundred noble warriors on horseback, and not the numberless foot-soldiers who supported them,<sup>23</sup> the poem is arrogating 'heroic' behaviour and values for the dominant class alone.

---

23 Jackson, *The Gododdin*, pp.14-15.

This class is defined in terms of the priorities of a society economically dependent on war as a means of revenue-raising, and a society whose borders and nationality are negotiable rather than formally defined. One of the Taliesin poems refers to *gwyr Prydein*, 'the men of Britain', as the enemy of Urien and his men,<sup>24</sup> indicating that Prydein, 'Britain', was not only the land of the Britons (or Welsh) in the sixth century, but the home of the Picts and Anglo-Saxons as well.

However, in order to carry out the economically essential work of plunder, the Gododdin warband, like a modern army, has to function as a cohesive unit. Lacking the modern concepts of nationalism and patriotism, the warriors are instead welded together in the poem by shared values and a shared purpose, expressed through a common discourse of 'heroism'. This discourse constructs a number of reiterated ideas about the preferred corporate behaviour of the warband, such as ferocity, extravagance, and the desire for fame and immortality. By means of this common discourse - used in both the A and B versions of the poem - the Gododdin warband is constructed as a unity, performing the essential work of a tribal society in negotiating with other tribes for land and wealth.

The skills of the warband are emphasised through reference to their ferocity and the numbers of enemy soldiers they kill. The men are described as *aergwn* (l.87), 'battlehounds', *mal baedd coed* (l.328), 'like a wild boar', *baran llew* (l.392), 'fury of a lion', *tarw trin* (l.411), 'bull of combat'. They spill blood with sharp blades and spears: *ef rhwygai a chethrai â chethrawr* (l.136), 'he tore and pierced with spear-points', *yd laddai â llafn fraith oeithin* (l.300), 'he slew with a blade, smeared and savage'. They decimate the enemy:

*Rhagorai, tyllai trwy fyddinawr,  
Cwyddai bum pymwnt rhag ei lafnawr*  
(ll.360-1)

[He went ahead, he pierced through armies, five fifties fell before his blades]

There is an emphasis on extravagance: the men are rash in battle and generous in peacetime. The poet says of Heinif ab Nwython:

*Oedd aillt ŵr gwinfaeth.  
Calon ehelaeth,  
Oedd gŵr llwyd heinif,  
Oedd llurig deinif,  
Oedd gyrth, oedd cuall,  
Ar gefn ei gafall.*

(ll.933-8)

---

24 Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, II.6.

[He was a man of breeding, nourished on wine, generous-hearted, he was a vigorous man of battle, he scattered breast-plates, he was hard, he was impetuous, on the back of his horse.]

In another stanza, the men are described as *enaidd ddichwant* (l.546), 'heedless of their lives', and one warrior is said to have *aerfaidd yn arfedd* (l.173), 'a daring purpose in war'. Because of their rashness, their boldness, their generosity with their own lives, the men rush to their deaths on the battle field for the sake of their lands. It is a common ethos which characterises them as belonging to the same culture.

The poem provides motivations for the warriors other than their need to defend their territories. A society dependent on warfare for survival has to develop powerful cultural reasons why young men should gladly submit themselves to a brutal death. The men of Gododdin are conditioned by two value systems, the opposition between honour and shame, and the belief in immortality through reputation, a belief enhanced by the Christian framework of the northern British tribes.<sup>25</sup>

The honour/shame sanction is common in tribal and feudal societies where the skills and energies of trained armies, unchecked by state controls, have to be directed towards appropriate targets. For the British warband, honour accrues from fighting rashly and ferociously against the enemy, from loyalty to one's lord and fellow soldiers, from generosity in gift-giving, all public acts of social honour.<sup>26</sup> Failure to make these public observances results in shame, also publicly acknowledged, which is part of the shaming process. The poem makes it clear that the men of Gododdin act only honourably, never shamefully. The poet says of Heilyn from the court of Senyllt:

*Nid ef borthi gwarth gorsedd Senyllt*

*A'i llestri llawn medd:*

*Goddolai gleddyf i garedd,*

*Goddolai lemair i ryfel...*

*Gwên ac ymhyrddwen hyrddbaid,*

*Diserch a serch ar dro,*

*Gwŷr nid oeddyn ddrych draed ffo,*

*Heilyn achubiad pob bro.*

*(ll.493-6, 503-6)*

[The court of Senyllt bore no shame, with its mead-filled vessels: he meted out the sword to the wrongdoer, he apportioned assaults to

---

25 Jarman discusses the apparently Christian references in the poem and the likelihood that the northern Britons were Christians in the introduction to his *Gododdin*, pp.lvi - lx.

26 Wendy Davies comments on the significance of gift-giving in early Welsh society, especially as a bond between men. See *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, p.51.

warfare.....Smiling and frowning alternately, unkind and kind by turns, (with men who did not show their heels in flight Heilyn assailed every land.]

In other words, Heilyn and his men were honourable, they fought hard in battle, they did not run away, their court was not shamed. The same theme occurs again when the poet says of the men in general, *ni phorthasan warth wŷr ni thechyn* (l.912), 'they bore no shame, the men who did not flee'. On the contrary, the men of Gododdin cause shame to others:

*Gŵr a aeth Gatraeth gan ddydd,  
Neus goreu o gadeu gywilydd.*  
(ll.107-8)

[A man went to Catraeth at daybreak, he put armies to shame.]

In addition to proving their honour on the battlefield through deeds of ferocious aggression, the men of Gododdin are motivated by their belief in the possibility of immortality through the celebration of their valour by the tribal poets, who will sing of their deeds down the generations. Speaking for himself, and for other poets, Aneirin asserts the bond of mutual obligation between warriors and praise-poets:

*Gwerth medd yng nghyntedd gan lliwedawr  
Hyfaidd Hir edmygir tra fo cerddawr.*  
(ll.65-6)

[In return for mead in the hall with the hosts, Hyfaidd Hir will be praised while there is a minstrel.]

There is also a connection between the warriors' deeds of glory and their immortality in a Christian sense, expressing the idea that bravery in battle guarantees a place in heaven as well as constant fame on earth:

*A'th fo di gwas nyf gwerth na thechud:  
Present gyfadrawdd oedd Breichiawl glud.*  
(ll.238-9)

[And may you be in heaven's dwelling-place because you did not flee: the talk of the world was Breichiawl the stalwart.]

It is possible, of course, that the references to Christianity were added during later redactions of the stanzas, or that the concept of *nef*, 'heaven', is a pre-Christian one, but the cultural value of fame is very clear. Men who perform valiantly in battle earn themselves longlasting praise on earth and immortality after death.

Stanza 64, celebrating Gwaednerth son of Llywri, brings together the essential attributes of the warband, the rashness, ferocity, desire for fame, and the high status of the warrior which guarantees his heroism:

*Arddyledog ganu cyman ofri:  
Twrf tân a tharan a rhyferthi.  
Gwryd ardderchog, marchog mysgi,  
Rhuddfedel, rhyfel a eidduni.  
Gŵr gwnedd difuddiog difyngi i gad  
O'r maint gwlad ydd i clywi.  
A'i ysgwyd ar ei ysgwydd hud arfolli woynw  
Mal gwin gloyw o wydrlestri.  
Ariant am ei fedd, aur dylwi;  
Gwinfaeth oedd Waednerth fab Llywri.*

(11.618-627)

[A fitting song of a noble host: the sound of fire and thunder and flood-tide. Excellent in courage, a horseman of turmoil, a blood-shedding reaper, he longed for war. The warrior tirelessly rushed to battle in whatever land he heard of it. With his shield on his shoulder he would take up a spear as if it were sparkling wine from glass vessels. Silver around his mead, he was owed gold; reared on wine was Gwaednerth son of Llywri.]

These are the values and attributes which make the *Gododdin* a 'heroic' poem, in the Chadwickian sense of the values of a militaristic ruling class. At the same time, the *Gododdin* construct of 'heroism' is culture-specific in that it describes practices suggestive of a particular social and economic context. The ferocious blood-letting and huge death-toll are necessary products of revenue-raising war, where booty pillaged from fallen warriors is a significant source of income. The extravagant intake of alcohol before the battle not only supplies courage but acts as a rudimentary anaesthetic when required. The reckless pursuit of a Christian afterlife is only meaningful in a society deeply imbued with Christian values. The desire for fame through song belongs to a culture in which oral praise-poetry is the only form of mass communication.

These are only some of the ways in which the 'heroism' of the men of *Gododdin* can be regarded as culture-specific, and such values will also be recognised as 'heroic' by any other cultures which happen to participate in a similar system of values. But there will always be differences. In the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem, the *Battle of Maldon*, for example, the warrior Byrhtwold exhorts his companions to stay on the battlefield and fight on, while he lies down with the body of their dead lord, Byrhtnoth,

an aspect of heroism found nowhere in the poems of Taliesin or in the *Gododdin*.<sup>27</sup>

The fictional world of the *Gododdin* depicts its warband - the centrepiece of the whole poem - as a military elite, an aristocratic social class representing the interests of a united people whose single name is "Gododdin". In the poem, the men of Gododdin are a coherent and deadly war machine, pre-eminent in the struggle against the English and defeated only by the force of superior numbers. But we have to compare this poetic 'reality' with the historical 'reality' constructed by other texts, which suggests that the Gododdin were not the only opponents of the English, or even the dominant opponents - Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* names the British chieftains who fought against the Anglians in the mid-sixth century as Urien of Rheged, Rhydderch Hen of Strathclyde, Gwallog, possibly of Elfed, and Morgant, of unknown territory, while the men of Gododdin are not mentioned in this context at all.<sup>28</sup> It is also likely that the northern British tribes existed in fragmentary and shifting allegiances among Picts, Scots and English, and were not themselves united against a common English foe. Nennius's account of northern British history states that Urien was killed through the treachery of Morgant, another British leader, not by the English.

A third area of disjunction between the poem and the historical sources is the matter of who exactly was the enemy whom the Gododdin were fighting. In the A version of the poem, the enemy are described as the men of Bernicia and Deira (for example, l.60, [g]wŷr Deifr a Brynaich, 'men of Deira and Bernicia'), whereas in the B version, the enemy are the Deirans only (for example, l.950, *teulu Dewr*, 'the warband of the Deirans').<sup>29</sup> It is possible then that the enemy were originally conceived of as being the Deirans only, and that the Bernicians were added at a later stage of the poem's transmission, presumably after the two kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira were united to form Northumbria during Aethelfrith's rule at the beginning of the seventh century.<sup>30</sup> The two kingdoms themselves were often hostile to each other and their sense of cultural and political identity was precariously thin.<sup>31</sup>

---

27 *The Battle of Maldon* was edited by E.V. Gordon in 1949, and a large section of it has been translated by R.K. Gordon in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, (Everyman, London, 1970), pp.329-334. See especially p.334.

28 Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*, p.xx.

29 This point was noted by Thomas Charles-Edwards, "The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*", p.64 n.70, and discussed briefly by David Dumville, "Problems of Historicity", pp.2-3.

30 According to Kenneth Jackson, this took place in 605, when Aethelfrith of Bernicia took possession of Deira, expelling its ruler Edwin (*The Gododdin*, p.10).

31 On the death of King Edwin of Northumbria in 632, for example, "the kingdom immediately fell apart into its two fundamental divisions of Deira and Bernicia" (Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1947, p.81).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the poem's historical context is the fact that English settlers of Bernicia were already occupying Gododdin lands from the middle of the sixth century,<sup>32</sup> which possibly explains why they are not named as enemies in the earlier version of the poem. If the Bernicians were already within their borders, there would be no reason for the men of Gododdin to march all the way south to Catraeth to fight them. However, even if the Gododdin were not actively hostile to these early settlers, directing their efforts more towards the Deirans further south, beyond the lands of Gododdin, the discourse of the poem reinforces the unity of Gododdin culture as though no other people inhabited their territory. In the poem, the English are either the enemy or are made to be invisible.

All these disjunctions are glossed over in the poem which constructs a cultural unity for the men of Gododdin, defined through a common discourse of heroism shared by both versions of the text.<sup>33</sup> The fictional world of the poem is smoothed into a seamless representation of the British struggle against the English, in which the Gododdin are foregrounded as particularly pre-eminent. The central image of the land-defending warband is the crucial symbol of cultural and military unity, and it is here that the *Gododdin* construct of 'heroism' resides.

If this construct of 'heroism' is culture-specific, and works to suggest a national and military cohesion at a time of change and fragmentation, to what extent can this construct be used to support the existence of a 'British Heroic Age' analogous to the Greek and Teutonic Heroic Ages and representative of a generic historical period? In the Chadwickian model, the generic Heroic Age is characterised by a *comitatus* culture and is produced by a set of common "antecedent conditions", including the loosening of the bonds of tribal law, the transfer of power from the kindred to the *comitatus*, and an instability arising from the absence of nationalism.

A main problem with this model, as applied to the *Gododdin*, lies in the concept of the *comitatus*, which is central to the Chadwickian model but which is, as I have already suggested, culture-specific rather than generic, like the heroic construct itself. The Welsh word for 'warband' which is used most frequently in the *Gododdin* is *gosgordd*, as in *gosgordd Mynyddog Mwynfawr* (l.106), 'Mynyddog Mwynfawr's retinue', and *gosgordd Gododdin* (l.903), 'the warband of Gododdin'. Also used, though less frequently (three times compared to seven occurrences of

---

<sup>32</sup> See Jackson, *The Gododdin*, p.9, also Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p.74.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Charles-Edwards demonstrates the similarities between the two versions in order to argue that they are derived from a common original. See "The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*", pp.54-61.

*gosgordd*), is the word *teulu*, which appears to have a similar range of meanings. As Thomas Charles-Edwards has already pointed out, however, in two out of the three examples in the poem *teulu* refers to the English hosts, [*t*]*teulu Brynaich* (1.88), 'the host of Bernicia', and *teulu Dewr* (1.950), 'the host of Deira'.<sup>34</sup> It is possible, then, that the poet perceived a difference between a *gosgordd* and a *teulu*, and that he uses *teulu* to signify something like *comitatus*.

The word *gosgordd* is based on *cordd*, meaning 'tribe, clan, family', and is therefore likely to signify a warband originally comprising members of a tribe or kin-group. The word *teulu*, on the other hand, comes from *tei* (a form of *tŷ*, 'house') and *llu*, 'host, troop', so that it signifies specifically a household retinue or warband which protects a lord in his hall and may also fight for him outside it. It therefore corresponds almost exactly to the Germanic *comitatus*, and is used in that sense in early Welsh literature. The men of Gododdin, on the other hand, were a *gosgordd*, a warband constituted on the basis of tribal and regional allegiances rather than as members of the same household.

This usage of *teulu* to indicate a domestic warband attached to a particular lord occurs in one of the earliest surviving poems in Welsh, the Juvenus *englynion*. One line reads *mitelu nit gurmaur*, 'my retinue is not very large', and it occurs in the context of the lord and his followers sitting round the cauldron in the hall and drinking mead.<sup>35</sup> Other examples confirm the impression that the *teulu* was specifically attached to the person of the king or lord as his bodyguard. The *Historia Gruffud Vab Kenan*, a twelfth-century life of the north Welsh ruler Gruffudd ap Cynan, tells of the deaths of some of Gruffudd's troops, *deudengwyr a deugeint o varchogyon Gruffud a'e deulu*, 'two tens and two twenties of Gruffudd's horsemen and his warband', as if there was a distinction between these two groups of men.<sup>36</sup> In the *Brut y Tywysogion*, the Chronicles of the

---

34 "The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*", p.56. The third use of *teulu* is a bit obscure: the warrior Tudfwlch is described as *lluarth teulu* (1.604), 'herb-garden of the warband', probably implying that he supported his fellow soldiers in the fray. But it also has a domestic significance, suggesting that the *teulu* was a particular section of the larger army with the specific responsibility of guarding the royal household and the person of the king.

35 See Ifor Williams's text and translation of the Juvenus poems in *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry*, edited by Rachel Bromwich (University of Wales Press, 1972), p.90. In his note to this line, Ifor Williams says of the word *teulu* (for *teulu*), "In meaning it is equivalent to *gosgordd*, 'retinue, household troops'" (p.95) but I am arguing that the two words did not always mean the same thing.

36 D. Simon Evans, *Historia Gruffud Vab Kenan* (University of Wales Press, 1977), p.10, ll.7-8. In his note to these lines, D. Simon Evans says, "Go brin y gellir ystyried bod y *marchoygon* ar wahan i'r *teulu*" (p.66), 'The 'horsemen' are hardly likely to have been different from the 'warband'". However, I think the *teulu* is distinguished as being the warriors specifically guarding the person of the king. Later, the text reads, "Ac en er vn lle hvnnv e digvydassant en e gylch o'e deulu e hun pypm marchauc ar ugeint" (p.15, ll.27-28), 'And in that same place twenty-five horsemen of his own retinue fell around him', indicating that the *teulu* was close by him for his protection.



Princes, the entry for the year 1078 says, referring to Rhys ab Owain: "Ac yna y dygywdawd holl teulu Rys, ac ynteu yn foawdyr megys karw ofnawc ymlaen y milgwn drwy y perthi a'r creigau", <sup>37</sup> And then the whole of Rhys's bodyguard fell, and he himself was a fugitive like a frightened stag before the hounds through the bushes and the rocks'. Again, this reference suggests that the *teulu* was not in itself an entire army, but was a specially constituted bodyguard of the king or ruler.

R.R. Davies quotes Gerald of Wales in the twelfth century as saying that the *teulu* consisted of *juvenes electi*, 'handpicked young men', and he also says:

The *teulu* was more than a royal bodyguard; it was the fighting force which protected the king's authority and title and promoted his cause in the endlessly competitive world of Welsh dynastic politics. Welsh law showed a due sense of priority when it proclaimed the *teulu* to be one of three indispensable necessities of kingship.<sup>38</sup>

It could be argued that the Welsh inheritance system of partibility, by which tribal lands were divided among the eligible male heirs of the four-generation kin-group, was partly responsible for the survival of the Welsh *teulu* long after the Germanic *comitatus* had evolved into the feudal system of vassalage. The system of partibility ensured that there was often a struggle for power between two or more co-heirs, and whoever emerged the victor did so largely because of the strength and prestige of his personal warband. The institution of the *teulu*, the household guard, therefore belongs not only to the historically defined 'Heroic Age' of conflict between Wales and the Anglo-Saxons. It continued to serve a social and political function right up until the Edwardian conquest of 1282, and the literature of Norman Wales - especially the Welsh romances and the poetry of the *gogynfeirdd*, the court praise-poets - accordingly continue to celebrate a 'heroic' culture long after the Chadwickian 'Heroic Age' had ended.

Wendy Davies has pointed to some important differences between early Welsh warbands and the Germanic *comitatus*:

Though the poet of *Canu Aneirin*, in particular, had a predilection for mentioning the faithfulness of the followers, there is nothing in this material which insists on the duty of loyalty to the same extent as in Anglo-Saxon poetry, particularly of the Late Old English period, and there is nothing to suggest that the warrior's service was lifelong, an obligation undertaken in young manhood and sustained until the death

---

37 Thomas Jones, *Brut y Tywysogion*, (University of Wales Press, 1955), pp.29-30.

38 R.R. Davies, *Conquest. Coexistence and Change. Wales 1073-1415*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987), pp.66-67.

of either party. Although there is clear evidence here, therefore, of the literary celebration of a type of relationship common in practice and also celebrated in literature in most of western Europe, there is nothing to suggest that the relationship became institutionalized into a framework of lifelong commitments in the way that it did in England and on the Continent.<sup>39</sup>

If the Welsh warband as described in the *Gododdin* is not the same as the Germanic *comitatus*, then the Chadwickian definition of the 'British Heroic Age' cannot be sustained. The model of the Germanic *comitatus*, with its implicit prefiguring of feudalism, cannot be simply transferred to the *Gododdin*, where the model of the *gosgordd* represents different kinds of social bonds and obligations.

From the evidence of medieval Welsh literature, it is likely that the *teulu* was perceived as a different kind of warband from the *gosgordd*, the one being a relatively small troop with the specific responsibility of protecting the person of the king or lord, at home or outside, and the other being an army of any size representing the interests of a whole tribe or tribal region. This is why the men of *Gododdin* are a *gosgordd* rather than a *teulu*, which corresponds more nearly, in Chadwickian terms, to the Germanic *comitatus*. If this is the case, then it is not entirely appropriate to describe the values of the *Gododdin* as being 'heroic' in exactly the same way as those of the *comitatus*. The 'heroism' of the *comitatus* is expressed through defence of the king or lord; the 'heroism' of the *gosgordd Gododdin* is expressed through defence of land and allegiance to tribal and cultural loyalties.

A noticeable feature of the *Gododdin*, in fact, is the absence of a single overlord, the one for whom a British army has been assembled and monumental sacrifices are made.<sup>40</sup> The lord is frequently referred to as Mynyddog Mwynfawr, who feasted the warriors for a year in his hall before they repaid his mead by giving up their lives at Catraeth. But the warriors are not surrounding him on the battle field, like a *teulu* or a *comitatus*, Mynyddog is apparently not fighting at Catraeth at all but has merely provided the headquarters where the men prepared for war.

The name of Mynyddog is not known outside this poem, apart from references dependent on the poem itself.<sup>41</sup> It is not one of the historical names from pre-Norman Britain, like Urien or Owain ap Urien of Rheged. It has even been suggested that it is not the name of a person at all but

---

39 Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, (Leicester University Press, 1982), p.69.

40 Jarman comments on the absence of Mynyddog from the expedition in his introduction to *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*, p.xxx.

41 See Rachel Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1978), pp.467-9, where she describes the surviving references to 'Mynyddawg Eidynd' or 'Mwynfawr'.

some kind of descriptive epithet or placename based on the word *mynydd*, 'mountain', and referring to 'the combined aristocratic forces of the northern highland zone'.<sup>42</sup> Even if it signifies a proper name in the text of the poem, it may be a personification of the land itself which the men are fighting for. There is certainly no characterisation of the lord, or explicit avowals of loyalty to a single lord, of the kind found frequently in Anglo-Saxon literature, and also in the poems of Taliesin where Urien of Rheged clearly functions as an overlord supported by a *teulu*.

Moreover, Mynyddog is not the only lord mentioned in the text (if indeed he is a lord at all). Blaen, in stanza 17, is said to have inspired the faithful men who followed him (l.151). Ceredig, in stanza 31, is described as *caradwy gynran* (l.317), 'lovable chieftain'. The *gosgordd Gododdin* therefore seems to comprise a number of lords or princes with their own warbands (*teulu*), rather than a single host following a single leader, Mynyddog, who is not even present at the battle.

This possibility is strengthened by the fact that not all the men came from the territory of Gododdin itself but were drawn in from other areas of north Wales and the Old North, such as Gwynedd (l.230) and Rhufoniog (l.856).<sup>43</sup> The unity of the 'men of Gododdin' is a matter of common tribal and cultural interests rather than a fact of belonging to the same area of northern Britain. Many of the warriors have nicknames or punning names, suggesting that it is not actual individuals who are being commemorated. Stanza 17 is dedicated to Blaen, whose name means 'forefront', stanza 95 celebrates Heinif, whose name means 'vigorous' and actually occurs in that sense in the same stanza (l.935). Another warrior is called Gwaednerth, which means 'blood-strength'. Taken together with the descriptive name of the lord, Mynyddog Mwynfawr, these names suggest that the 'men of Gododdin' are being immortalised as representatives of a lost era of British greatness rather than as historical individuals.

The poem is therefore celebrating a *gosgordd* which comprises a number of different tribal and regional groups united by their identification, not with a single lord, but with a single area of land, the region of Gododdin, in the process of collapsing under the weight of English settlement and conquest. A number of references in the poem

---

42 This suggestion was made by John Koch in a paper delivered to the Annual Conference of the Celtic Studies Association of North America at the University of California, Berkeley, in March 1991. I am very grateful to Professor Koch for allowing me to see a draft of his article, "Rethinking Aneirin and Mynyddawe Mwynfawr", to appear in *Language Sciences*.

43 The poem also contains a reference to Geraint, a prince of Dumnonia in the south-west of Britain (modern Cornwall), and his 'men of the south' (l.821). In his note on this line, Jarman doubts that the reference is authentic. But even if it is not literally 'true', perhaps it indicates an attempt to assert the strength of the Gododdin army and its pan-British nature.

indicate that the warriors are fighting for land, rather than for a lord. In stanza 87 the poet says:

*Trychant eurdorchog a gryusiasant  
Yn amwyn breithell, bu edrywant.  
(ll. 865-6)*

[Three hundred wearing gold torques attacked, defending the land, there was slaughter.]

Describing Urfai, the poet says it was usual for him to defend the land of Gododdin (l.947). Tudfwlch the Tall drove out Saxons from his land and his homesteads (l.125). Throughout the poem, there is a strong sense that this is a territorial battle fought by groups of men united by a common cause, the defence of their tribal lands against an invading enemy.

As far as it is possible to make a distinction between a *gosgordd* and a *teulu* in early Welsh society, the army of the Gododdin is explicitly a *gosgordd*, an army united by tribal and regional interests rather than by loyalty to a single lord. If this is the case, the Chadwickian model of a generic 'Heroic Age' based on the values of the Germanic *comitatus* does not include a 'British Heroic Age', since the analogy is not supported by the evidence of the *Gododdin* (though the Taliesin poems come closer to the *comitatus* model). The nearest analogy to the *comitatus* in Welsh society is the *teulu*, a social and political unit whose significance long outlived the *comitatus* and the historical confines of the Chadwickian 'Heroic Age'.

More importantly, the values and social organisation of north-eastern Britain as indicated in the *Gododdin* do not conform to the Chadwickian "antecedent conditions" for the generic Heroic Age. The 'bonds of tribal law' have not been thrown off, since tribal loyalties enable a number of lords from different regions to band together with their warriors to defend their lands. Power has not been transferred 'from kindred to *comitatus*', but remains with the kin-groups, the tribal dynasties who decide which allegiances will be most profitable for their people. And though there may be 'an absence of nationalism' in the modern sense of the word, the whole poem is nevertheless a celebration of a powerful vision of cultural unity, a coherent British culture in the area of the Gododdin before it was fragmented and undermined by the expansion of Bernicia.

Such a vision would have acted as an effective piece of propaganda, both in the sixth and in the seventh centuries. In the sixth century, the Bernicians first began settling in Gododdin territory, culminating in their expansion under Aethelfrith who, according to Bede, 'ravaged the Britons

more cruelly than all other English leaders'.<sup>44</sup> But earlier in the sixth century, when the Bernician settlements were first beginning, a British raid against the Deirans to the south, rivals of the Bernicians themselves, may well have been supported by the Bernician settlers in Gododdin territory. This might explain why only the Deirans are mentioned as the enemy in the older B version of the poem. Despite the defeat of the men of Gododdin, as recounted in the poem, their heroism attested to British supremacy in the land of Gododdin before the reign of the ambitious Aethelfrith.

In the first half of the seventh century, Bernicia and Deira were united under the first legitimate Northumbrian king, Edwin, who waged a series of wars against the Britons of the north and of north Wales. The British leader Cadwallon of Gwynedd, allied with the Saxon nobleman Penda of Mercia, responded to this aggression by attempting to drive the Northumbrians out of north-eastern Britain and was killed in the attempt in 633.<sup>45</sup> Five years later, Edinburgh was taken by the Northumbrians and the territory of Gododdin finally collapsed. The A and B versions of the *Gododdin* show that the poem, as a claim to the legitimacy of British land-holdings in the region of Gododdin, retained its significance over a considerable period of time, and continued to be recited even after the fall of Gododdin as an elegy to the lost lands of the British people in the north east. In the historical contexts of sixth- and seventh-century Britain, the cultural unity of the men of Gododdin works to assert the pre-eminence of these British people in the north of Britain and the legitimacy of their defence of tribal lands.

I think, then, that the *Gododdin* as a poem is 'heroic' in the modern Chadwickian sense, bearing in mind that this is class-based and non-universal. It describes a culturally-defined 'heroism' which belongs to the value-system of a militaristic ruling class, but it also has culture-specific features which relate it to the social and historical context of sixth- and seventh-century northern Britain, as constructed by the poem. In the poem, 'heroism' functions specifically as a means of asserting cultural unity, through a unified discourse of heroism, in a warband of warriors from different regions, serving under different lords (and representing different chronological periods).

It is clear that on the evidence of the poem we cannot construct a historical period called the 'British Heroic Age' which exemplifies a generic 'Heroic Age'. The Chadwickian model of the generic 'Heroic Age'

---

<sup>44</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.34. The text has been translated by Leo Sherley-Price, *Bede: A History of the English Church and People*. (Penguin, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> Bede, himself a Northumbrian, calls Cadwallon 'a barbarian more savage than any pagan'. For his account of this period, see *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.20 and III.1. See also Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 74-83.

as a series of historical periods defined by a *comitatus* culture and a similar social and political context, does not describe the context of northern British society as it is constructed in the poem. Perhaps we could refer instead to the *Gododdin* as a plunder-economy dominant-class text located in an Age of British-English Border Negotiation.

The construct of heroism in the poem is located in the warband, the *gosgordd*. The discourse of heroism, as a defining ethic of a military ruling class, functions in the poem to unify groups of warriors into a single cultural and national force, in the sense that they represent the interests of the land of Gododdin, as opposed to other regional and linguistic groups of northern Britain. To subsume the poem into a 'British Heroic Age', which is itself defined as a subset of the 'Germanic Heroic Age', is to claim the poem as part of a universal culture and to accept its discursive unity as transparent and inevitable. In fact, the discourse of heroism in the poem works to impose a coherence of culture and purpose on a group of men and a military enterprise which are products of complex, fragmented and contradictory circumstances in northern Britain of the sixth and seventh centuries.