

A Sixth-century Reference to the British *bardd*

THE *bardd* represents a Common Celtic institution. Evidence that he existed in Britain, Ireland, and Gaul can be, and has been, used to reconstruct his characteristics. Because an archetype can be reconstructed the shortage of evidence for the British *bardd* in the early medieval period is no obstacle to thinking that he was active throughout these and indeed in prehistoric times. A contemporary reference to his existence in the second half of the sixth century may nevertheless be of interest to supplement what Gildas and *Historia Brittonum* tell us.¹

Venantius Fortunatus (c. 540–c. 600) crossed the Alps in 565 and travelled extensively in Frankish territory, visiting Mainz, Cologne, Trier, Metz, Verdun, Reims, and Paris before settling at Poitiers in 567. From the very beginning he moved in aristocratic circles; many of his poems are addressed to Frankish and Gallo-Roman kings, noblemen, and bishops. While staying with King Sigibert at Metz in 566 Venantius composed several poems for Lupus, a duke of Champagne.² One of these concludes as follows:³

Romanusque lyra, plaudat tibi barbarus harpa,
Graecus Achilliaca, crotta Britanna canat.
Illi te fortem referant, hi iure potentem,
ille armis agilem praedicet, iste libris.
Et quia rite regis quod pax et bella requirunt,
iudicis ille decus concinat, iste ducis.
Nos tibi versiculos, dent barbara carmina leudos:
sic variante tropo laus sonet una viro.
Hi celebrem memorent, illi te lege sagacem:
ast ego te dulcem semper habebo, Lupe.

A few words have to be said about the first two lines of this otherwise straightforward passage before going on to examine its relevance to the title of this discussion. The passage as a whole aims to contrast the sort of praise that Lupus gets from barbarian poetry with what he receives from civilized poets like Venantius himself, who is here concluding a poem lavish in its praise of Lupus. In doing so it depends heavily on parallelism in syntax. In line 1 the *Romanus* represents the civilized verse and the *barbarus*, obviously, the barbarian. Line 2 adds the *Graecus* to the first of these categories, and the 'crotta Britanna' to the second. The first half of line 1 juxtaposes a substantival adjective in the nominative singular, *Romanus*, with the name of the appropriate musical instrument, the *lyra*, in the instrumental ablative; the second half parallels this construction, naming the *barbarus* and

¹ The most recent comprehensive discussion of the British *bardd* is in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, vol. i. ed. A. O. H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Swansea, 1976).

² On Venantius' career and work see J. Szövérfy, *Weltliche Dichtungen des lateinischen Mittelalters*

(Berlin, 1970), pp. 219–90. On Lupus see Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age* (London, 1926).

³ *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati Opera Poetica*, ed. Friedrich Leo, MGH Auct. Ant. iv (Berlin, 1881), vii/8, lines 63–72.

his instrument, the *harpa*, a Germanic term corresponding to Old English *hearpe*, Old High German *harpfa*, Old Norse *harpa*, and so on. The first half of line 2 carries on the pattern by naming the *Graecus*, but *Achilliaca* poses a problem. It is attested only once, in the present passage, and opinions as to its meaning vary.¹ Some scholars hold that it is the name of a stringed musical instrument, arguing that in a series *lyra/harpa/achilliaca/crotta*—as we shall see *crotta* too designates a stringed instrument—it can hardly mean anything else. Alternatively, it has been interpreted as a substantival adjective in the accusative plural, meaning something like ‘songs about Achilles’, an interpretation that breaks the syntactical pattern set in line 1. But this happens anyway in the second half of the line. There the musical instrument, the *crotta*, appears, but instead of the expected *Britannus* to parallel *Romanus*, *barbarus*, and *Graecus* we find *Britanna*. Venantius’ editor Leo proposed reading ‘*britannia pro britannica (accusat. ut achilliaca)*’, and in this he is followed by Jarman.² Like the argument for *Achilliaca* as the name of a musical instrument, this suggestion is clearly prompted by a desire to impose greater syntactical regularity on the line, but the more immediately obvious reading of ‘*crotta Britannia*’ as ‘the British *crotta*’ also makes perfect sense. For the purposes of this discussion it is unnecessary to decide between ‘the *crotta* sings about British matters’ and ‘the British *crotta* sings’.

A second difficulty concerns *crotta*: did Venantius have a Celtic instrument in mind, or was he referring to the originally Germanic instrument whose name, taken into Gallo-Roman, emerged as Old French *rote*? To a Celticist the question hardly seems worth asking. Venantius explicitly associates the *crotta* with Britain, and the term itself has cognates in Old Irish *crott* and Middle Welsh *crwth* and *croth*. OI. *crott* has two meanings: (a) ‘stringed musical instrument’ and (b) ‘hump, rounded object’. MW. *crwth* bears the first of these meanings, and *croth* the second. Pokorny lists these terms under IE. **krūt-* ‘Wölbung, Brust, Bauch’,³ a meaning that is apparently as far removed from ‘stringed musical instrument’ as one could wish, but the semantic development is explicable if one imagines a musical instrument with a rounded or bulbous sound box. The Welsh *crwth* and its medieval English derivative, the *crowd*, did have such a shape,⁴ and while this does not necessarily say anything about their ancestor’s appearance over a millennium earlier, it does support the plausibility of the explanation just offered. In OI. *crott* was declined as an *ā*-stem, and goes back to an earlier **krottā*. From the Middle Welsh form *crwth* (=OW. **cruth*) we learn that the root vowel was originally *u*: Irish **krottā* < **kruttā* shows regular lowering of stressed *u* when *ā* stood in the following syllable.⁵ Similarly Venantius’ *crotta* can, via the *ā*-affection in Brittonic languages which Jackson dates to between the fourth and the mid sixth centuries,⁶ be reconstructed as **kruttā*. Now, the problem is that while MW. *croth* is

¹ See H. Steger, ‘Die Rotte’, *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft*, xxxv (1961), 116; I would like to thank Mr. C. Page, Junior Research Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, for drawing my attention to this article.

² A. O. H. Jarman, ‘Telyn a Chrwth’, *Llên Cymru*, vi (1960-1), 171.

³ Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches*

Wörterbuch, 2 vols. (Bern, 1959-69), p. 624.

⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Percy A. Scholes, 10th edn. (Oxford, 1970), p. 271.

⁵ Rudolf Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, trans. D. A. Binchy and Osborn Bergin (Dublin, 1946), p. 46.

⁶ Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), pp. 576-8.

explicable both semantically and phonologically from **kruttā*, *crwth* is not. It does not show *ā*-affection and must come from **krutto-*. This is significant, because if one accepts that *crwth* preserves the original vocalism, the form *crotta* which Venantius alleges to be British has to be rejected: the British word for 'stringed musical instrument' never had an *-o-*. Two possible explanations for the *o* suggest themselves. On the fairly safe assumption that Venantius' information came to him via Gallo-Roman, the form *crotta* can be seen as having shared in the general lowering of *u* to *o* in Late Latin.¹ On the other hand, Jarman has suggested that Venantius, who spent some thirty years in Poitiers, would have been well placed to hear about his *crotta* from Brittany;² Late British *u* had under some circumstances begun to go over to *o* in Breton as early as the sixth century.³ If the *-a* of *crotta* is regarded as the Latin, not the Celtic, ending, *crotta* can be seen as the Breton development of Brittonic **krutto-*.

Steger has investigated the history of OF. *rote* (Latinized *rota*) and concluded that both from the point of view of what is known of the *crwth* and the *rote* as instrument types and from the phonology of their names they were distinct and separate instruments when Venantius wrote in the sixth century.⁴ Direct borrowing of the Celtic term into Gallo-Roman and subsequent development into *rote* is unlikely. Latin always had an initial *k* (spelled *c*) in the combination *kr-* available, which in fact survives into Modern French, and it is consequently difficult to see why the initial *k* of **krutto-* should have been lost, which it would have to have been to give *rote*. Borrowing from Celtic via Germanic into Gallo-Roman is equally unlikely, for Germanic too always had an initial *kr-* available. Steger cites a suggestion by Krause that the Celtic word was borrowed before the shift of *k* to an unvoiced guttural (spelled *h*) in Germanic, and that it subsequently participated in the shift giving **hrotta*, which could then develop to *rote*, but this would take us back to the first century A.D. at the very latest. Such an early borrowing has no significance for a discussion of the instruments in the sixth century, when their common origin would obviously have been forgotten. It might be added that borrowing from Germanic to Celtic would have had to be very early as well, if only to account for the diffusion of the *crott* and the *crwth* to Ireland and Britain. Steger shows that Frankish **hrōta*—**hrotta* is dismissed as a ghost form—is represented in OHG. *hruozza* on the one hand and, borrowed into Gallo-Roman, became OF. *rote* on the other by regular loss of initial *h* and shortening of the root vowel.

The textual variants *chrotta* and *rotta* have in the past led to suggestions that Venantius had in mind not the Celtic instrument but the **hrōta*. During the initial period of borrowing, when the Germanic term was still alive in the Gallo-Roman area, the initial *h* could easily have been written *crotta* or *chrotta* before disappearing in *rotta*. Decisive here is the fact that Venantius associates his *crotta* with Britain: in view of the Irish and Welsh cognates there can be no doubt that the Celtic instrument was originally intended. According

¹ M. K. Pope, *From Latin to Modern French* (Manchester, 1934), p. 89.

² 'Telyn a Chrwth', p. 171.

³ Kenneth H. Jackson, *A Historical Phonology of Breton* (Dublin, 1967), pp. 125-7.

⁴ 'Die Rotte'.

to Steger, the fact that Venantius saw it as a British instrument has been explained away as a consequence of his ignorance as to its origin!¹ This is in any event a weak argument; keeping in mind that it has usually been advanced without taking account of the Irish and Welsh evidence, it can safely be dismissed. The alternation of *chrotta* with *crotta* must, as Steger suggests, be explained as a consequence of a situation in which scribes copying Venantius' work were unfamiliar with the British instrument but knew the **hrōta*, and, interpreting *crotta* as one possible spelling for **hrōta*, on occasion introduced the equally acceptable spelling *chrotta*. This tendency can be observed in the form *rotta*. The one manuscript that has it changes *leudos*, a Germanic term which occurs a few lines later in the poem, to *laudes*. *Leudos* is definitely the correct reading, for Venantius uses it in the preface to his collection of poems.²

Venantius' juxtaposition of civilized with barbaric poetry in praise of Lupus was more than a rhetorical flourish. It was a response to the conditions under which he found himself having to compose panegyrics in sixth-century Frankish court society. The civilized poets, among whom he includes himself (line 7: 'nos') praise the duke's civilized virtues: his justice, learning, and wisdom. The *barbarus* and the *crotta Britanna* call him 'fortem' and praise his 'armis agilem', the arts of war. The *barbarus* does this with songs called *leudos* to the accompaniment of a *harpa*. As already noted, both *leudos* and *harpa* are Germanic terms. The first is simply the word 'harp'; *leudos* is a plural formation and corresponds to OHG. *liod*, OE. *lēop*, 'song', ON. *ljóð*, 'stanza' (pl. 'song').³ From the preface to his collection of poems, furthermore, we find that Venantius had in his travels among the Franks been put off composing his own elegant verses, for, 'apud barbaros', 'leudos' are sung to the harp amid drunken feasting, and his own poems are unheeded.⁴ Now, the Old English poems *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, and *Deor* contain references to a court poet, the *scop*, who sang panegyrics and recited heroic poems in the royal mead-halls of Heroic-Age Germania.⁵ He sings 'bi hearpan',⁶ and his songs are called *leop*: the lay about Finn recited by the *scop* in King Hrothgar's hall during the night's feasting is called a 'leop',⁷ and the *scop* Deor's rival in the poem of that name is described as a 'leoðcræftig mon'.⁸ The *scop* of the Old English texts is not a specifically English phenomenon. The poems preserve traditions about the characters, events, and institutions of the Germanic Migration period, and the *scop* they describe is a figure in this West Germanic poetic tradition. What Venantius offers is contemporary first-hand evidence that the *scop*, or whatever the Franks called his functional equivalent, was active in the courts of the Frankish aristocracy in the mid sixth century, when the consolidation of the medieval kingdoms after the *Völkerwanderung* had just begun.

¹ 'Die Rotte', p. 116.

² *Fortunati Opera*, ed. Leo, p. 2.

³ F. Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1934).

⁴ *Fortunati Opera*, ed. Leo, p. 2.

⁵ On the *scop* see Wilhelm Wissmann, 'Skop', *Sitzungsberichte der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, phil.-hist. Klasse 1954, nr. 2; Klaus von See 'Skop und Skald. Zur Auffassung des Dichters bei den Germanen', *Germanisch-Romanische*

Monatsschrift, xiv (1964), 1-14; Egon Werlich, 'Der westgermanische Skop', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, lxxxvi (1967), 352-75.

⁶ *Widsith*, ed. Kemp Malone, *Anglistica* 13 (Copenhagen, 1962), p. 26, line 105.

⁷ *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. F. Klaeber, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1950), line 1159.

⁸ *Deor*, ed. Kemp Malone, 4th edn. (London, 1966), p. 27, line 40.

It is clear that Lupus was actually the recipient of praise from a *Romanus*, Venantius himself, and from a *barbarus*, a Frankish court poet. It is just as clear that the *Graecus* and the *crotta* had no place in his court. They were introduced to add rhetorical depth to the opposition between *Romanus* and *barbarus*. Nevertheless, the identification of the British *crotta* with the poetry of the *barbarus* is extremely useful as evidence for the existence of the *bardd* in Britain in the sixth century or before. In making the identification Venantius is in effect saying that the British, like the Franks, had a court poet who celebrated his aristocratic patron's heroism in battle to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument of some sort. That his information was accurate can, as already noted, be established on Welsh and comparative Celtic evidence. The virtue of the passage under discussion is its date. Like the observations of Gildas about the 'empty praises' that Maelgwn of Gwynedd received 'from the mouths of criminals who grate on the hearing like raving hucksters—mouths stuffed with lies and liable to bedew bystanders with their foaming phlegm',¹ it provides contemporary witness for the existence of poets like Taliesin and Aneirin in mid-sixth-century Britain. If Venantius' source of information was traditional rather than based on contemporary report, his testimony allows us to go earlier still.

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¹ *Gildas. The Ruin of Britain and other Works*, ed. Michael Winterbottom (London, 1978), 34.6.