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A British-led expeditionary force sacked Rome in 390 BC

Belinus, Brennus and the Sack of Rome (390 BC)

extracted and translated from the *Tysilio Chronicle* (Jesus College MS LXI)

by

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And following his [Dunvallo Molmutius's] death, quarrelling and discord broke out between his sons Belinus¹ and Brennus² over the realm [Britain] and who should govern it, for each of them desired the crown for himself. But learned men of great wisdom made peace between them, and they divided the realm into two parts. And because Belinus was the eldest son, he obtained Lloegria [England] and Kymry [Wales], with Cornwall besides. This was in accordance with the ancient laws of Troy concerning the firstborn's inheritance. And to Brennus fell the whole of the country north of the Humber, all of Albany [Scotland], but in subjection to his brother. And this was agreed between them and five years of peace went by.

Then those who hated peace, came to Brennus, telling him that it was timid and disgraceful of him to yield his rights to his brother, they both being born of the same parentage and holding the same rank. Moreover they said, "You are more wise in battle than he, for when Cheulfus, the prince of the Moriani,³ came into your realm, you straightway chased him out of it. Break this humiliating agreement, therefore, that stands between you and your brother, and go to the king of Lochland⁴ and take his daughter for your wife. And then, with him as ally, you shall win back your right!"

And Brennus was spurred on to great anger by their counsel, and he went to Lochland and wedded the daughter of its king. And when Belinus heard of this, he was wounded in heart and bethought it great treachery that his brother had sought this alliance against him. And Belinus mustered a mighty army and marched across the Humber and captured castles and towns, manning them with his own soldiers.

And hearing of this, Brennus summoned a mighty host from Lochland. And [when he was] sailing cheerfully with his fleet towards his own land, behold, Guthlac,⁵ king of the Danes, for love of the woman to whom Brennus was now wed, pursued him. And when he, *Guthlac*, had sighted the ship wherein Brennus was sailing, he did battle against him until with grappling irons he captured his ship, in which also was Brennus' wife, and towed it back into the midst of his own fleet. Whereupon, of a sudden there came a mighty, calamitous

wind which scattered the ships to every shore, and in this way they sailed for five days. And the king of the Danes came ashore on the coast of Albany, and on hearing of it the men of that land captured them and brought them before Belinus, who was awaiting his brother from Lochland.

And besides the vessels of the Danish king, there were three others also belonging to Brennus. And Belinus seized them with joy and began to avenge himself against his brother. And Brennus arrived after some days, having gathered his fleet together from along the coast of Albany. And he heard tell that Belinus had seized both his men and his wife. And he sent to his brother commanding him that he restore his wife and his kingdom to him again, and he would slay him also if he met him. And when Belinus heard it, he scorned the demands, both concerning his wife and his realm. And then Belinus mustered together an army of all the mounted warriors of Britain, and prepared to meet Brennus in battle.

And no sooner had Brennus learned of this, than he came against Belinus at a place called the Forest of Caledonia,⁶ and there did they bravely fight one another, for their renown in battle was great. And men fell on either side like ears of corn before the reapers. And at last the Britons won the day, sending the army of Lochland a broken [army] back to its ships. And in that battle there fell fifteen thousand men of Lochland, and not one escaped unharmed. And Brennus did scarcely reach one of the ships, and he fled to Gaul. The remainder sought refuge wherever they might find it.

And now, having vanquished his foes, Belinus called together all the nobility of the realm to Eboracum, that he might seek counsel concerning the king of the Danes. For he, *Guthlac*, had sent ambassadors to him, offering homage and fealty and annual tribute so that he and his loved one might be granted their freedom. And Belinus allowed [his petition] according to counsel, and required at his hand vows [of fealty] from the king of the Danes, and hostages also. Then he, *Guthlac*, and she whom he loved, were set free. And when Belinus had pacified the kingdom from end to end, there was none to withstand him. And he confirmed the laws and proclaimed peace throughout the land as well in the temples as in the cities, which he blessed with unheard of privileges.

And in those days there arose disputes concerning the highways, whose borders were not clearly defined. And so he, *Belinus*, summoned before him all the stonemasons of Britain, and commanded them to build roads of stone and mortar, according to law. And one of *the roads* ran through such cities as lay in its path from the tip of Cornwall up to Cape Bladdon⁷ in Albany, the entire length of Britain. And another was built at his command to run across the land from Menevia⁸ on the one coast to Port Hamon on the other, the same being Southampton.⁹ And two other roads also he caused to be laid, running obliquely from corner to corner, passing, as did the others, through the cities [that lay in their path]. And when all was done, he commanded that they be held sacred, and bestowed upon them the right of sanctuary [so] that none dare molest whoever sought refuge there, however grievous his offences might be. And after these things did Belinus rule in peace.

And Brennus, his brother, who had sought refuge in Gaul, was grieved for his exile from his land and his realm. And he could not regain it, and knew not what he should do. And so, with eleven servants,¹⁰ he stood before the king of Gaul and laid before him all his woes. And when he, *the king of Gaul*, disdained to help him, he went straightway to the king of

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Burgundy,¹¹ who welcomed him warmly and granted him audience, and bestowed honour upon him above all his court. For in all that he did, Brennus acted with honour, and the king loved him just as if he were his son. For Brennus was handsome and courtly to look on, and was learned and able, as a prince ought to be.

And after the king had bestowed his love upon him, he gave to Brennus for his wife his only daughter and heir, and bequeathed Burgundy to him when he should succeed him, provided the king should have none other heir. But if he, *the king*, should yet have a son, then he would strengthen the hand of Brennus that he might win back his own realm. And one of the princes also promised him help. And so Brennus wedded the girl, and the nobility of the land became subject to him, and he governed the land that was granted him of the king with his own hand. And Brennus restored to these nobles who were loyal the lands which the king had taken from their fathers, and in this manner did he bind their loyalty and love through his own kindness. And his hospitality was renowned throughout all the realm, for he fed and watered all who came to him, closing his doors upon no man.

And once he was certain that the hearts of all his people were with him, he bethought himself how he might avenge his hurt upon Belinus his brother for the things that he had done to him. And all his subjects swore loyalty to him and promised him arms for to subdue any place in all the earth that he might wish to conquer. And straightway he gathered a mighty host, and coming to Gaul he sought their permission to pass through their land unmolested toward Britain. And when the fleet was made ready upon the Flanders coast, they sailed with a following wind till they landed in Britain.

And once Belinus knew that his brother was coming with a navy, he mustered a mighty army and sallied forth to meet him, that they might do battle together. And then, as they were about to close in on each other, so Tonwen, their mother, ran through the host and came to them, pleading to see Brennus her son, for she had not set eyes upon him for many a year. And, shaking with fear, she went to the place where her son Brennus was standing, and kissed him many times. Then, weeping bitterly, she spoke these words to him: “My beloved son, remember your mother’s love for you who carried you nine months in her womb. And remember all that I suffered to raise you [to manhood]. Think on these things this day, and for the sake of your heavenly Creator, forgive your brother. Let that wrath be still which you have nurtured against him, for he gave you no reason to hate him so. It was not he who banished you from your land and your realm, for he has done you no harm. And in all that he did, he did nothing to humiliate you. But rather he has raised you up, for though you once were in subjection to him for the lesser part of the realm, you are now his equal in dignity. Surely, it is a far greater honour to be prince of all Burgundy, than to rule only a small part of Britain. And recall that this quarrel between you was not caused first by him, but by you when you sought the hand of the daughter of Lochland’s king, and through that alliance sought to bring down *your brother!*”

And when she had spoken these words with much weeping, he resolved in his heart to follow all his mother’s bidding and live in peacefulness and quiet. And taking his helmet and cap of mail from off his head, he approached to where his brother was standing. And when he, *Belinus*, saw his brother draw nigh, he cast aside his weapons and embraced him. And so were they soon reconciled. And their hosts, welcoming the peace, also cast down their

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weapons. And they, *Belinus and Brennus*, marched to London where they held council, both they and the nobility. And they determined to go to Gaul and take possession of it, and all its provinces.

And having stayed in London for a year, they marched out towards Gaul, and began to lay the land waste. And hearing of it, the men of Gaul rallied together into one place to withstand them, but Belinus and Brennus vanquished them every one. And the men of Gaul fled the field, but the Britons pursued them till they captured their king and forced him to yield. And the Britons demolished the castles and subdued the whole realm within the year. And after, they descended with their hosts onto the land of Rome, where they destroyed castles throughout all Italy and laid waste the land as far as Rome [itself].

Now in those days two consuls governed Rome, Galens and Porsenna,¹² to whom was entrusted the government of the land. And when they perceived that none could resist the might of Belinus and Brennus, by the counsel of the Senate of Rome they sought to establish peace with them, offering them a great tribute of silver and gold, promising the same for every year should they leave them in peace. And for token of the pledge, Belinus and Brennus took hostages of them.

And Belinus and Brennus took their armies from that place, and set out for Germany. But once they became embroiled in conflict with these tribes, they, *the Romans*, repented of the promise that they had made to the Britons, broke their word, and went to the aid of the Germans. And Belinus and Brennus were enraged to hear of it, and they bethought themselves how they might vanquish two armies at once, for the coming of the Roman army was a great threat. And they decided to leave Belinus with the Britons to overcome the Germans, whilst Brennus and his [Burgundian] host sought to overrun Rome.

And learning of this, the Roman army abandoned the men of Germany and tried to overtake Brennus and his army before they reached Rome. And when Belinus heard of it, he brought his army against them by night into a wooded valley that lay in their path. And Belinus concealed himself and his men there to ambush them. And behold, arriving in that place the following day, and seeing the weapons of their foes gleaming along the valley, the men of Rome feared greatly, thinking that Brennus and the Burgundians were there. And Belinus suddenly fell upon them, and the Romans straightway fled the field, being unable either to don their armour or make a stand. And Belinus pursued them until darkness prevented further slaughter.

And after vanquishing his foes, Belinus reached Brennus his brother on the third day after he, *Brennus*, had dug in around the walls of Rome. And when the two armies were come together before the city, they laid siege to it and assaulted it mightily, bringing great suffering upon the people of Rome. And they built a scaffold before the city gates, upon which to hang the hostages should they, *the people of Rome*, not surrender the city. But *the Romans* held the city nonetheless, and they resisted now with catapults and at other times with ballista, using whatever means [of resistance] they could find. And when Belinus and Brennus saw it, they burned with indignation, and ordered the hanging of twenty-four hostages of the highest rank before the city gates.

And then the men of Rome marshalled their troops into divisions and poured out of the city and engaged them in open battle, for word had reached them from the two captains

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who had regrouped their scattered troops, that they were marching to their rescue, and they were on no account to surrender the city. And the [Roman] army fell suddenly upon the Britons in two divisions, and there was great bloodshed.

And when Belinus and Brennus beheld their troops being slaughtered, it grieved them and they rallied their soldiers, exhorting them to resist the foe. And they withstood them, and, at last, when thousands on either side had fallen, Belinus and Brennus overcame *the men of Rome*. [And they] slew Galens¹³ and captured [both] Porsenna and the city. And Belinus and Brennus divided the spoil amongst their army. And having won the day, Brennus ruled Rome as a tyrant,¹⁴ and he governed the people with great cruelty. But as all this is rehearsed in the histories of the Romans, I have here not told the half of it for the weariness of telling all. And Belinus returned to Britain and governed the realm in peace for the rest of his days. And he repaired the castles, whichever of them lay in ruins, and built new ones also. And beside these things, he built a city on the banks of the Usk, and established there the arch-druidship of Dyfed.¹⁵ And when the Romans came [later] to these shores, they called it the City of Legions, for they kept their winter-quarters in that place. And Belinus caused to be built a marvellous gate in London on the banks of the Thames, which was called Belin's Gate.¹⁶ And upon its battlements he constructed a great tower, and at its foot a wharf for the mooring of ships. And everywhere he ratified his father's laws and upheld truth. And there was great wealth among the people in his days, the like of which was not seen before or after. And at last, when the day of his death was come, his body was cremated and his ashes sealed in a golden urn of wondrous craftsmanship, which was buried within the top of that tower in London, of which we have already spoken.

Endnotes

GoM = Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Historia Regum Britanniae*, c1138)

LXI = Jesus College MS LXI (Tysilio Chronicle – *Brut y Britanniait*, originally composed second half of AD 600s; later translation c AD 1150 by Caradoc of Llancarfan)

Livy = Livy. *The Early History of Rome*. tr. Sellincourt. 1960. Penguin Classics. Harmondsworth.

Livy records the Sack of Rome as Ab Urbe Condita (AUC) 363. Rome was founded in 753 BC (AUC 1). So 753 - 363 = 390 BC. Part of Livy's account of the Sack of Rome is reproduced as Appendix I, with the name of Brennus, the British commander of the expeditionary force, highlighted.

Marcus Terentius Varro (*Fasti Capitolini*) dates the opening engagement - the Battle of the Allia river which opened the way for the Sack of Rome - to 18th July 390 BC. The Gauls camped outside Rome at sunset on the same day. The Dunvallo Molmutius mentioned at the start of the piece is he who first wrote down the ancient laws of Britain, as the Molmutine Laws [see More 4]. 'Dunvallo Molmutius' is the Latinised version of his name made up by GoM. This king's real name was Dyfnal moel myd.

1) As in GoM (3:1). LXI = *beli*.

2) As in GoM (3:1). LXI = *bran*.

3) As in GoM (3:1). LXI = *Edwetro*, who is prince (*tywysog*) of the *Morien*.

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4) GoM (3:1) supplies the name *Elsingius* for the king in question. LXI simply calls him *brenin llychlyn*, the king of Lochland. The country of *llychlyn* which translates as Lochland, or Land of the Lochs, is said by GoM to be Norway. Rhys, however, in his *Celtic Heathendom* (p. 355), of 1888, he correctly identifies *llychlyn* with the western coast of present-day Scotland. GoM's confusion seems to have arisen through the Norwegians' one-time claim that this part of Scotland properly belonged to Viking Norway, and the medieval (and earlier) mind would naturally have equated the claimed territory with Norway itself. But just to confuse matters further, *Llychlyn* is known to modern Welsh as Scandinavia in general.

5) LXI = *Gwychlan*. GoM (3:2) = *Ginchtalacus*.

6) LXI = *Kaladyr*. GoM (3:3) names the forest as that of *Calaterium*. Thorpe, in his version of GoM (p. 311), thinks that this term applies to the wilds of Scotland, noting in passing that another identifies it as Celidon Wood near Lincoln. Given that Albany is the background of events here, then a wood in Scotland (the Caledonian Forest) seems the most likely location.

7) GoM (3:5) = *Caithness*.

8) LXI = *kaer vyniw*, present-day St David's.

9) Part of this road lies beneath the modern A36 out of Southampton.

10) GoM (3:6) has twelve knights.

11) As in GoM (3:6), who also identifies him as *Segnius*, lord of the *Allobroges* or Burgundians. *Segnius* appears as *Segovesus* in Livy (p. 379). In LXI, Burgundy appears as *byrgwin*.

12) As in GoM (3:9). LXI = *Galins* and *fforkena*. Porsena, though not actually given in Livy's account of the Gaulish Invasion of 390 BC, is known to be a very ancient Roman name and not one that would normally be expected to appear in Old Welsh. GoM's *Gabius* (identified by LXI as *Galins*) seems to be a garbled memory of one *Quintus Fabius* whom Livy most surely mentions. Quintus Fabius (Livy, pp. 381-2) heroically charged the Gaulish lines, which provoked the subsequent sacking of Rome. The Gaulish army knew him to have come from Rome, and it is therefore natural that they should have supposed him to be acting on Rome's behalf. There is further confusion of detail between LXI and Livy, but this only demonstrates that LXI is no mere rehash of Livy, whose history of Rome was in any case probably not available in 12th-century England. The *Beli* of the Welsh chronicle is *Bellovesus* in Livy, the nephew of Ambitgatus, king of the Bituriges. The Bituriges were the Celtic tribe inhabiting the west central region of France, who gave their name to the city of Bourges. *Beli*'s mother (unnamed in LXI) is called *Tonuuenna* in GoM, and she was clearly the sister of Ambitgatus, marriages between the royal families of the British and Continental Celts being the common practice. *Bran* in LXI, Brennius in GoM, is *Brennus* in Livy, the leader of the Gaulish Invasion, and it is interesting to compare the two accounts of the invasion as seen through the eyes of Livy and the Welsh chronicler. It seriously challenges those theories that attempt to dismiss *Beli* and *Bran* as mere personifications of local gods. Note that to the Romans, everything west of Germania was Gaul - except Belgium and Britannia. The fact that the early British chronicler differentiates as regarding the invasion force [specifying Britons & Burgundians], as only a local would, again belies the notion of copying.

13) Livy doesn't mention the death of Quintus Fabius, which again contradicts any notion of

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copying.

14) As elsewhere in LXI, the term 'emperor' (*ymerawdwr*) is used here loosely. Tyrant might convey the meaning better.

15) As in LXI. GoM (3:10) = *Demetia*.

16) As in GoM (3:10). LXI = *Bilinssgad*, seemingly a phonetic rendering of the Saxon name.

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Appendix I

Livy's History of Rome: Book 5: The Veii and the Destruction of Rome by the Gauls

5.48

But the greatest of all the evils arising from the siege and the war was the famine which began to afflict both armies, whilst the Gauls were also visited with pestilence. They had their camp on low-lying ground between the hills, which had been scorched by the fires and was full of malaria, and the least breath of wind raised not dust only but ashes. Accustomed as a nation to wet and cold, they could not stand this at all, and tortured as they were by heat and suffocation, disease became rife among them, and they died off like sheep. They soon grew weary of burying their dead singly, so they piled the bodies into heaps and burned them indiscriminately, and made the locality notorious; it was afterwards known as the Busta Gallica. Subsequently a truce was made with the Romans, and with the sanction of the commanders, the soldiers held conversations with each other. The Gauls were continually bringing up the famine and calling upon them to yield to necessity and surrender. To remove this impression it is said that bread was thrown in many places from the Capitol into the enemies' pickets. But soon the famine could neither be concealed nor endured any longer. So, at the very time that the Dictator was raising his own levy at Ardea, and ordering his Master of the Horse, L. Valerius, to withdraw his army from Veii, and making preparations for a sufficient force with which to attack the enemy on equal terms, the army of the Capitol, worn out with incessant duty, but still superior to all human ills, had nature not made famine alone insuperable by them, were day by day eagerly watching for signs of any help from the Dictator. At last not only food but hope failed them. Whenever the sentinels went on duty, their feeble frames almost crushed by the weight of their armour, the army insisted that they should either surrender or purchase their ransom on the best terms they could, for the Gauls were throwing out unmistakable hints that they could be induced to abandon the siege for a moderate consideration. A meeting of the senate was now held, and the consular tribunes were empowered to make terms. A conference took place between Q. Sulpicius, the consular tribune, and **Brennus**, the Gaulish chieftain, and an agreement was arrived at by which 1000 lbs. of gold was fixed as the ransom of a people destined ere long to rule the world. This humiliation was great enough as it was, but it was aggravated by the despicable meanness of the Gauls, who produced unjust weights, and when the tribune protested, the insolent Gaul threw his sword into the scale, with an exclamation intolerable to Roman ears, "Woe to the vanquished!"

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