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A British legion stationed near Orléans c. 530? Evidence for Brittonic military activity in late antique Gaul in *Vita Sancti Dalmatii* and other sources¹

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Abstract

Several recent books lead the reader to believe that *Vita sancti Dalmatii*, written in c. 800, records a *legio Britannica* (a British army) stationed near Orléans in c. 530. As this paper demonstrates, the only correct detail of this purported record is the word *legio*, and this may well have a non-military connotation. This paper includes the first English translation of the relevant sections of *Vita sancti Dalmatii*, and a discussion of its possible interpretations in the context of Franco-Brittonic relations. It also examines more broadly the evidence for Brittonic military activity in Gaul proper from 450 to 560, and suggests that, irrespective of the interpretation of *Vita sancti Dalmatii*, the importance of the Britons in late antique Gaul has been overlooked.

Introduction

In *The Britons*, Christopher Snyder, a renowned historian of this *gens* in the post-Roman period, states, "... as late as 530 a *legio Britannica* was stationed at Orléans, according to the *Life* of St. Dalmas, bishop of Rodez."² One would expect such a remarkable piece of evidence for sixth-century British military activity in the heart of Gaul, written c. 800,³ to be due more than a cursory mention in books dealing with the post-Roman Britons, or with late-antique Gaul. Contrary to this expectation, Snyder

¹ I am grateful for advice from Lynette Olson, and for the helpful reports from the two anonymous referees for the journal *Heroic Age*, which accepted an earlier version of this manuscript. I am deeply indebted to Christopher Gidlow for his insightful comments on that version, in particular for suggesting the non-military interpretation of *legio*, and to J. Holland for correspondence on the translation of the *vita*.

² C.A. Snyder, *The Britons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 150.

³ B. Krusch (ed.), *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici et antiquiorum aliquot*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum, Bd 3 (Hanover: Hahn, 1896) (= MGHSSrer.Merov.), 544.

gives no further comment in *The Britons*, and cites only *The Bretons* by Patrick Galliou and Michael Jones.⁴ The latter book contains no further information and fails to give any citation. Penny MacGeorge gives exactly the same information,⁵ and while she cites *Vita sancti Dalmatii* itself, her real source is evidently *The Bretons* (which is listed in her bibliography). The ultimate source for this information would seem (see sec. 4.2 below) to be Léon Fleuriot,⁶ whose work appears in the bibliography of *The Bretons*. Fleuriot translates a few of the relevant sentences of the *uita*, and very briefly discusses them. There is no published English translation of the *uita*.

The treatment of *Vita sancti Dalmatii* in the modern literature is not only cursory,⁷ it is also inaccurate. Although the information in the above books can be traced to Fleuriot, who had obviously studied the *uita*, it is wrong in almost all details. As I show in this paper, the year of the incident was not 530 (it was between 534 and 541), it did not involve a *legio Britannica* (the *uita* has *legio Bretonum*), and there is no reason to think that it was near Orléans. Moreover, even the word *legio* may have a non-military meaning in the context of the *uita*.

This article is concerned with evidence for Brittonic military activity in Gaul proper (by which I mean Gaul east of the Brittany peninsula) in Late Antiquity, and in particular with providing the first proper treatment of *Vita sancti Dalmatii* in this context. Section 2 briefly analyses the other evidence for Brittonic power in Gaul proper in the period 450–560. Section 3 describes the political situation in Francia in and around the 530s. These sections give the background for considering the evidence in the *uita* in section 4. This includes the first translation of all relevant parts of the *uita*, followed by a discussion of how it should be interpreted, and its significance.

⁴ P. Galliou and M. Jones, *The Bretons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 132.

⁵ P. MacGeorge, *Late Roman Warlords*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 162.

⁶ L. Fleuriot, *Les origines de la Bretagne* (Paris: Payot, 1980).

⁷ There are a few in addition to those discussed above. B. Bachrach *Merovingian Military Organization, 481–751* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1972), 12, quotes a fragment of the Latin text in a footnote (correctly giving *legio Bretonum* as one would expect), but without comment. J.–C. Cassard, “Sur le passé romain des Anciens Bretons,” *Kreiz* 5 (1996), 5–32, at 11, also correctly gives *legio Bretonum* but in this he is following Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 272, as he says that the Breton legion was established around Orléans and was encountered by Dalmas in about 540 (see sec. 4.2).

2 Brittonic influence and military activity in Gaul proper, 450–560

2.1 Against the Huns

In legend, the oldest record of which is the early ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*,⁸ the emigration of Britons across the channel to Gaul began with Magnus Maximus in 383. The true course of the migration is uncertain, but the attendance of Mansuetus, *episcopus Britannorum*, at the 461 Synod of Tours is generally taken as evidence that it was well underway by the mid-fifth century.⁹ The settlement of Britons was no doubt densest in the peninsula to which they gave their name, but “Bret-” place-names and dedications to Brittonic saints are found throughout Armorica,¹⁰ an area roughly corresponding to the mediaeval dukedoms of Brittany and Normandy.¹¹

In the mid-sixth century, Jordanes listed the peoples who fought for Aëtius against the Huns on the Catalaunian plains in 451.¹² Among them are the *Liticiani* or *Litiani* (in different manuscripts), who are otherwise unrecorded.¹³ Fleuriot argues that this is an easily explicable scribal error for *Litavii*, that is, the people of Litavia. This last is the name the Britons gave to Brittany,¹⁴ suggesting that the Litavians were Brittonic settlers. This is made more plausible because they are listed immediately after the *Armoricani* (Armoricans), whose name is also mangled into *Armoritiani*. The Armoricans had been in rebellion against Rome for much of the time since *c.* 410, but evidently responded to Aëtius’ request, perhaps in return

⁸ *Historia Brittonum* 27 (J. Morris [ed. and trans.], *British History and the Welsh Annals* [London: Phillimore, 1980], 65).

⁹ Synod of Tours, subscr. (Corpus Christianorum, series Latina 148.148).

¹⁰ See Fleuriot, *Les Origines*, map 7; and J. Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), map 4.

¹¹ This is the common understanding of the extent of Armorica (e.g., R. van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul*, *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, vol. 8 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 36). It was sometimes used to denote a much larger extent (E.A. Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain*. [Suffolk: Boydell, 1984], 71), at least in the early fifth century (van Dam, *Leadership and Community*, 36).

¹² Jordanes, *Getica* 36.191 (Th. Mommsen [ed.], *Jordainis. Romana et Getica*, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi*, Bd 5/1 [Berlin: Weidmann, 1882] [= MGHA], 108).

¹³ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 244; and E.A. Thompson (rev. P. Heather), *The Huns* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 152.

¹⁴ Snyder, *The Britons*, 147.

for recognition of their independence. Sometime after 451, but before *c.* 490, the Armoricans came under Brittonic rule, and ceased to be an independent military force, to which I shall turn attention now.

2.2 Against the Visigoths

If Britons fighting on behalf of the Roman empire in central Gaul in 451 is only a strong possibility, the same in *c.* 469 is a certainty. From the accounts of Jordanes,¹⁵ Sidonius Apollinaris,¹⁶ and Gregory of Tours,¹⁷ the following history can be reconstructed. Eurich, king of the Visigoths, perceiving the weakness and instability of the Roman state in the late 460s, sought to expand his kingdom in Gaul. The Western emperor, Anthemius, therefore sought aid from the Britons. Their king, Riotimus, came via the ocean and was received as he disembarked from his ships, reportedly with twelve thousand men.¹⁸ Arvandus, the praetorian prefect in Gaul, secretly urged Eurich to attack the Britons stationed beyond the Loire and to divide Gaul with the Burgundians; he was later found guilty of treason. The Britons, confident in their courage, numbers, and comradeship, advanced to Berry, south of the Loire. There, while awaiting Roman reinforcements, they were attacked by a large army under Eurich. After a long fight the Visigoths drove the Britons from Bourges (the capital of Berry), slaying many of them. Riotimus fled with the lesser part of his army to the Burgundians, who were then allied to the Romans. Finally an army under a certain Count Paul, comprising Romans and Franks, arrived and

¹⁵ Jordanes, *Getica* 45.237 (MGHAA 5/1.118–119).

¹⁶ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 1.7; and 3.9.

¹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.18–19 (B. Krusch and W. Levison [eds], *Gregorii episcopi Turonensis. Libri historiarum X*, MGHSSrer.Merov., Bd 1/1, 2nd edn [Hanover: Hahn, 1951], 65). English translation in L. Thorpe, *The History of the Franks*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1974).

¹⁸ It is commonplace to dismiss this claim of Jordanes; see, e.g., I.N. Wood, “The End of Roman Britain: Continental evidence and parallels”, in M. Lapidge and D. Dumville (eds), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Suffolk: Boydell, 1984), 1–25; C.A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Briton and the Britons A.D. 400–600* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 83; and G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 276. However, it is hard to see how a much smaller army could have been perceived as the principal obstacle to Visigothic power in Gaul since a powerful nation like the Visigoths could have fielded an army of twenty to thirty thousand. See P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 455.

defeated the (presumably battle-weary) Visigoths, taking much booty from them.

The fact that Riotimus' ships came "by way of the ocean" would seem to prove that he was a king in Britain. However, there is an argument to be made that he was instead (or as well) a king in Armorica, because Arvandus' treasonous letter located the Britons north of the Loire.¹⁹ Jordanes seems to equate Riotimus' disembarkation with the Britons arrival in Berry, suggesting that the Britons travelled up the Loire in their fleet, perhaps as an offensive measure against Saxon pirates who were active there at this time.²⁰ If this is the case, the Britons could well have been in Armorica prior to embarking (or re-embarking) for a journey by sea to the Loire.

That Riotimus' army came from, or in any case took power in, Armorica may be supported by the mid-sixth-century historian Procopius. He reports that, at the time the Visigoths had conquered Gaul as far as the Rhône (c. 475), "the Arborychi had become soldiers of the Romans."²¹ From the context (see sec. 2.3) it is clear that Procopius' *Arborychi* is an error for *Armorici*.²² Their becoming Roman soldiers might refer to the presence of an Armorican contingent at the Catalaunian plains in 451. However, the Visigoths, Franks, and Burgundians also fought there for the Romans, and although Procopius mentions them in the same chapter as the Arborychi, he does not describe them in the same terms. Thus the Armoricans becoming Roman soldiers probably refers to a later event, with the campaign by Riotimus on behalf of the Romans being an obvious candidate.

¹⁹ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistula* 1.7. Since Arvandus would have been based at Arles and Sidonius either at Rome or Clermont, and since the Visigoths were domiciled in Aquitaine, "beyond the Loire" can only mean north of that river.

²⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.19 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.65).

²¹ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 1.12.13 (J. Haury, *Procopii Caesariensis Opera Omnia*, vol. 2: *De bellis libri V–VIII*, Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana [Leipzig: Teubner, 1905], 64–65). English translation in H.B. Dewing, *Procopius*, vol. 3: *History of the Wars, Books V and VI*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919).

²² H. Sivan, "The Appropriation of Roman Law in Barbarian Hands: 'Roman-Barbarian' Marriage in Visigothic Gaul and Spain," in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 189–204, at 197. I have amended "Arborychi" to "Armoricans" in the quotation from the translation by Dewing below.

There are several reasons for thinking that before *c.* 490, and quite possibly since Riotimus' time, Procopius' Armorican soldiery comprised mainly Britons. First, the Armorican peninsula was known as Britannia from the mid-sixth century if not earlier, and was known exclusively as Britannia by the late sixth century. Second, Procopius' Armoricans waged war against the Franks in the late fifth century. The Britons are likewise recorded fighting against Clovis in 491. There is no similar record for non-Brittonic Armoricans. Third, the Franks failed to vanquish Procopius' Armoricans. The only non-Frankish polities known to have existed in sixth-century Armorica were the kingdoms of the Britons. Fourth, at a time when the Franks had become Catholics, Procopius' Armoricans willingly become junior partners in a union with them. The Britons of Armorica likewise had accepted Frankish suzerainty by 511, and were regarded by early sixth-century Frankish clerics as one of the kindred peoples of the Franks. Fifth, Procopius had a habit (common among Roman historians) of identifying peoples by the names the Romans gave to the former inhabitants of their homelands, often from much earlier times (e.g. calling the Franks "Germans"). We may now consider these points in more detail.

2.3 Against the Franks

"Roman" rule in northern Gaul lasted until at least 486. In that year, according to Gregory of Tours, the *Rex Romanorum*, Syagrius was defeated by Clovis, a king of the Franks, near Soissons, after which Clovis "seized the kingdom of Syagrius," seemingly completing his westward advance into Gaul.²³ Gregory's accounts of Clovis' wars in general, however, are simplistic.²⁴ Moreover, a more nuanced version is given in *Liber historiae Francorum* of *c.* 727: "Clovis enlarged his kingdom, extending it as far as the Seine. At a later time he occupied as far as the river Loire."²⁵ The first phase of expansion, up to the Seine, can presumably be identified with the defeat of Syagrius.

The only other historian of northern Gaul in the late fifth century is Procopius. He provides his account merely as background to Justinian's wars, but it is broadly compatible with other records, and should not be

²³ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.27 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.71).

²⁴ E. James, *The Franks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 79–80.

²⁵ *Liber historiae Francorum* 14 (B. Bachrach [ed. and trans.], *Liber historiae Francorum* [Lawrence KS: Coronado, 1973], 134).

ignored.²⁶ Procopius' history centres on the relations between three militarized peoples: the "Germans ... who are now called Franks," the Armoricans, who lived next to them, with whom the Franks ultimately "united" (see sec. 2.4 below) because "they were not able to overcome them by force," and a third group:

Now other Roman soldiers [in addition to the Armoricans], also, had been stationed at the frontiers of Gaul to serve as guards. And these soldiers, having no means of returning to Rome, and at the same time being unwilling to yield to their enemy who were Arians [the Visigoths presumably], gave themselves, together with their military standards and the land which they had long been guarding for the Romans, to the [Armoricans] and Germans; and they handed down to their offspring all the customs of their fathers, which were thus preserved, and this people has held them in sufficient reverence to guard them even up to my time [mid-sixth century]. For even at the present day they are clearly recognized as belonging to the legions to which they were assigned when they served in ancient times.²⁷

I suggest that Procopius' Armorican soldiers were predominantly Armorican Britons and that his "Roman guards" were the soldiers who had served the last regular Roman regime between the Seine and the Loire. It must be noted that the interpretation of Procopius is contested; my view is consistent with that of Hagith Sivan,²⁸ but contrary to those of Fleuriot,²⁹

²⁶ B. Bachrach, "Procopius and the Chronology of Clovis' Reign," *Viator* 1 (1970), 21–31, at 22–25.

²⁷ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 1.12.16–18 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.65).

²⁸ Sivan, "The Appropriation of Roman Law," 197, locates the Amorici north-west of the Loire, and characterises them as "recent British migrants and descendents of the British troops [of] Magnus Maximus" in the process of integration with "Roman" locals.

²⁹ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 180, thought that Procopius' Roman soldiers must be Britons, saying, "Soldats britto-romains serait sans doute plus juste" and appealing to the *legio Britannica* (sic!) in *Vita sancti Dalmatii* for corroboration. See sec. 4.3 for a criticism of this conclusion. That Britons and Romans were not conflated, even at the time of Procopius' writing, is evidenced by the 567 Synod of Tours, at which the inhabitants of Armorica were distinguished as either Briton or Roman. See E.A. Thompson, "Procopius on Brittia and Britannia," *The Classical Quarterly* n.s. 30 (1980), 498–507, at 504. It is the latter of these, the "Gallo-Romans" whom Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 181, seems to have identified as Procopius' Americans. To fit other evidence (see sec. 2.2) he implies wrongly that Procopius has the Romans (Fleuriot's Britons) supporting the Americans (Fleuriot's Gallo-Romans) against the Franks.

Bernard Bachrach,³⁰ Edward James,³¹ and Guy Halsall.³²

Regarding the Armorican soldiers, Procopius himself is our earliest evidence that the Armorican peninsula was called *Britannia* by the mid sixth century.³³ Gregory, writing *c.* 594, also uses this name when talking of events in the mid-sixth century, and never uses any other; his contemporaries did likewise.³⁴ It has been suggested that the Britons were encouraged to settle in Armorica by the Empire as *foederati* (“soldiers of the Romans” in Procopius’ language, perhaps) in order to bring the troublesome Armoricans under control.³⁵

Regarding the Roman guards, Aegidius was probably appointed as *magister militum per Gallias* by Emperor Marjoran in 458, and continued

³⁰ Bachrach, “Procopius,” 25, submerges Procopius’ Roman soldiers within the Armoricans and refers to them together as “inhabitants of the area between the Seine and the Loire.” Among Bachrach’s Armorican forces are counted: Britons, Saxons, followers of Gallo-Roman magnates, Roman soldiers and their descendents, and, most notably, Alanic cavalry (“Procopius,” 25–29; and *Organisation*, 10). Bachrach imagines that these disparate peoples formed a “loose confederation” (*Organisation*, 3), which yielded to Clovis all of its land by a negotiated settlement in *c.* 504 (“Procopius,” 29).

³¹ E. James, *The Origins of France* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 27, altogether ignores Procopius’ Roman guards, and identifies the Armoricans with the Gallo-Romans “west of the Seine and north of the Loire.” MacGeorge, *Warlords*, 121, also makes this identification. While such a broad geographic definition is possible for Armorica in the early fifth century (see n. 11 above), the identification of these peoples is quite another matter. The Armoricans were one of the peoples who joined the Romans in defeating Attila (see sec. 2.1). If the Gallo-Roman inhabitants of this vast area of Gaul (Thompson, *Saint Germanus*, 71), including Tours, Orléans, Chartres, Paris, and Auxerre, were acting like an allied barbarian tribe already in 451, surely we would know more about it. Curiously, James dismisses the obvious alternative explicitly, but without justification, saying merely: “The Arboorychoi can hardly be the inhabitants of the Armorican peninsula, which was being over-run by the British at the time.”

³² Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 304, also ignores the Roman guards whom Procopius has opposing the Visigoths, but he then employs Procopius’ Armoricans in precisely the position thus vacated, identifying them as “Roman forces on the Loire”.

³³ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 4.20.4–5 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.590). See also Thompson, “Procopius on Britta and Britannia,” 498–499.

³⁴ Thompson, “Procopius on Britta and Britannia,” 502.

³⁵ See, for example, P. Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 492–493, who believes (as indicated by his map X) that the lands of the Armoricans had become the lands of the Britons by *c.* 480.

to rule much of the north, and perhaps parts of the south also, until his death in *c.* 465.³⁶ His son Syagrius evidently continued to rule north of the Seine, at least around Soissons, but the political status of the area between the Seine and the Loire (excluding Armorica) is uncertain.³⁷ Regardless, Roman soldiers stationed there indeed would have been guarding their lands against the Arian Visigoths (whom Aegidius had fought), as Procopius describes. Thus the second phase of Frankish occupation in the *Liber historiae Francorum* can probably be identified with Procopius' peaceful hand-over from Roman power.

Undoubtedly Procopius epitomises complex processes lasting many years into simple events. Thus it is impossible to be sure of the dates, or in many cases even the ordering, of these events. Nevertheless, we must ask the question: when did this surrender of Roman soldiers and land occur? Syagrius' defeat in *c.* 486 is a *terminus post quem*. Clovis presumably must have extended his territory to the Loire before he began to dispute the possession of Aquitania with the Visigoths. The earliest date recorded for this apparently protracted struggle is *c.* 496, in annals dating to the seventh century or earlier.³⁸ In addition, the most natural reading of Procopius places the Roman surrender before the marriage of Alaric II to Theodegotha, daughter of Theodoric (see sec. 2.4 below). This gives an even earlier *terminus ante quem* of *c.* 494.³⁹ But the most natural reading of Procopius also places the surrender after a war, and then a rapprochement, between the Armoricans and Franks, evidently after the latter had converted to Catholicism (see sec. 2.4 below). Clovis' conversion is unlikely to have been earlier than the date Gregory implies of *c.* 497,⁴⁰ so we appear to have reached an impasse.

The most reasonable resolution is that the process of Roman territorial surrender actually began prior to the war between the Armoricans and Franks, since in any case Roman territory between the Seine and the Loire would have separated (at least for the most part) the territories of the Armoricans and Franks. The Franco-Armorican war was

³⁶ MacGeorge, *Warlords*, 83–108.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159–164.

³⁸ James, *The Franks*, 86; Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 256; and Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 298.

³⁹ H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. T.J. Dunlap. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 203.

⁴⁰ Bachrach, "Procopius," 21.

probably underway in 491 (see below). Thus the best interpretation of the evidence is that, in a period *c.* 490, the majority of Roman soldiers between the Seine and the Loire surrendered their lands to Clovis, while others of them did likewise to the Armorican Britons. As well as dominating Armorica, Britons may well have ruled other parts of Gaul between the Loire and the Seine in the late fifth century.

Procopius' account of the Franco-Armorican war is brief. After the Armoricans had become soldiers of the Romans:

the Germans, wishing to make this people [the Armoricans] subject to themselves, since their territory adjoined their own and they had changed the government under which they had lived from of old, began to plunder their land and, being eager to make war, marched against them with their whole people. But the [Armoricans] proved their valour and loyalty to the Romans and shewed themselves brave men in this war, and ... the Germans were not able to overcome them by force.⁴¹

Indeed, western Armorica was the only part of Gaul that remained unconquered by Clovis and his sons, apart from the far south. The implication that the Armoricans had recently (presumably after 460 but before 490) changed their government is intriguing—could it refer to the advent of Brittonic rule there?

An incident from a Franco-Brittonic war survives in *Liber de compositione castris Ambaziae*. This is a “bizarre mélange of old annals, local traditions, and legendary texts,”⁴² compiled in the 1140s⁴³ and much influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth's pseudo-history of the preceding decade. However, there seems no obvious reason to discard its bald and circumstantial reporting of a conflict between Clovis and the Britons:

in the tenth year of his [Clovis'] reign [491], when it had been made plain to him on his return from Saxony that the Britons from the fortified town of Blois had overrun the banks of the Loire between Tours and Orléans and, hiding in the woods, were killing travellers, Clovis descended with haste, slew or dispersed the Britons and

⁴¹ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 1.12.13–14 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.64–65).

⁴² Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 226–227.

⁴³ M.L. Day, *Late Arthurian Literature* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), 17.

destroyed Blois. A little later, however, he restored the castle, higher and better placed.⁴⁴

Accepting this record,⁴⁵ we once again have Brittonic forces fighting hundreds of kilometres to the east of the Brittany peninsula. The most likely explanation, in light of Procopius' account, is that Blois was one of the towns willingly surrendered to the Britons by its Roman garrison.

2.4 Allied with the Franks

If Clovis did not overcome the Britons in their war against them, he does seem to have limited the area under their control to Brittany, in the wide geographic sense. The settlements of these Britons (or Bretons as they may now be called) were concentrated in the peninsula but their rule probably extended (as did ducal Brittany) east to Rennes and south-east to Nantes on the Loire. There is a dearth of early Frankish archaeological remains, or place names, in these areas, suggesting that they were not occupied by the Franks until the later sixth century.⁴⁶ Although the inhabitants of these eastern areas maintained a separate identity (as "Romans") from the Bretons, there is no reliable historical record for any polities in northern Gaul in the sixth century apart from those of the Franks or Bretons.⁴⁷

The reliable evidence for Breton polities is that of Gregory of Tours. For instance, he says, describing the doings of Chanao, a count of the Bretons (*Brittanorum comes*) in c. 544: "As soon as he [Chanao] heard [that his brother was dead], he took over the entire kingdom. For from the death of king Clovis [511], the *Brittani* were always under the power of the Franks, and were called counts, not kings."⁴⁸ Gregory seems to have added the second sentence in order to explain why he calls Chanao a count, even though he evidently ruled a kingdom. Gregory's several accounts of the

⁴⁴ *Liber de compositine castri Ambaziae* in *Chroniques d'Anjou*, ed. P. Marchegay and A. Salmon (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, 1856), 23: "Clodoveus ... anno decimo regni sui Britones ab oppido Blesis, qui ripas Ligeris inter Turonim et Aurelianum impugnabant, nemoribusque occultantes viatores interimebant, cum sibi a Saxonia revertenti ostensum esset, festinus descendit, Britonibus fugatis et peremptis Blesim delavit. Paulo tamen altius in competentiori loco castrum illud restauravit." My own translation partly follows Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 228–229.

⁴⁵ Snyder, *The Britons*, 150, following Galliou and Jones, *The Bretons*, 132.

⁴⁶ Galliou and Jones, *The Bretons*, 140.

⁴⁷ N.K. Chadwick, *Early Brittany* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1969), 194–195.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 4.4 (MGHSSer.Merov. 1/1.137).

deeds of Chanao and his fellow “counts” demonstrate beyond doubt that the Bretons were self-governing.

Procopius was probably describing the same political situation when he wrote:

since the Germans were not able to overcome them [the Armoricans] by force, they wished to win them over and make the two peoples kin by intermarriage. This suggestion the [Armoricans] received not at all unwillingly; for both, as it happened, were Christians. And in this way they were united into one people, and came to have great power.⁴⁹

Although this quote gives equal importance to the Franks and Armoricans, from the context it is clear that the latter were junior partners. Procopius relates these events in order to explain how the “Franks [who] were called ‘Germani’ in ancient times ... first got a foothold in Gaul, and ... how they became hostile to the Goths [i.e. Ostrogoths].”⁵⁰

The “uniting” of the Franks and Armoricans by intermarriage might be seen as contradicting the continued existence of an autonomous Armorica under Breton rule. But this is not so. Procopius uses similar language shortly after in referring to the king of the Ostrogoths: “Since Theodoric wished to attach [the Visigoths and Thuringians] to himself, he did not refuse to intermarry with them. Accordingly he betrothed to Alaric ... leader of the Visigoths, his [daughter] and to Hermenefridus, the ruler of the Thuringians [his niece].”⁵¹ While the kingdom of the Visigoths did, after Alaric’s death in 507, come to be ruled by Theodoric in 511, this was only after a war between the two Gothic nations.⁵² Moreover, the Visigothic kingdom regained its autonomy even before Theodoric’s death.⁵³ The far smaller kingdom of the Thuringians became a protectorate of Theodoric, but retained its own kings. Thus Procopius’ “uniting” of the Franks and Bretons need imply only that a peace treaty was agreed upon, at least one strategic marriage was arranged, and the Bretons accepted nominal Frankish suzerainty.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 1.12.14–15 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.65).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.11.29 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.63).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.12.21–22 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.66).

⁵² Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 309.

⁵³ P. Heather, *The Goths*, The Peoples of Europe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 254.

⁵⁴ Sivan, “Marriage,” 197, points out that such marriages had long been standard in Roman diplomacy, so the importance Procopius gives to this aspect of the peace treaty may reflect Byzantine practice more than the reality in Gaul.

Even given that Procopius' Armoricans were junior partners in coalition with the Franks, the prominence he gives them may surprise. However, there is independent evidence that the Franks regarded the Bretons literally as a brother nation in the early sixth century. Two ninth-century texts, *Historia Brittonum* (ch. 17) from Wales and *Codex Augiensis CCIX* from Francia, contain near-identical origin myths for the peoples of western Europe, most likely produced by Frankish clergy in the first third of the sixth century.⁵⁵ In this myth, all the major western nations (from a Frankish perspective) are descended from Noah via one Alanus, who had three sons. From (negatively named) Negue/Nigue came the barbarian pagan nations of the Saxons, Thuringians, and Bavarians, and the Arian Vandals who were strongly anti-Catholic. From Armenon/Ermenon came the moderate Arian nations of the Goths, Visigoths, Gepids, Burgundians, and Lombards. Finally from Hessitio/Hisision came the Catholic Franks and their allies, the Romans, Britons, and Alamans.⁵⁶

There is no corroborating evidence that the Bretons helped the Franks towards the "great power" they did gain, but given their common faith and Procopius' testimony, one may suspect that they joined the Catholic coalition that allowed Clovis finally to conquer Aquitania from the Visigoths in 507/8. Allied to Clovis were the East Romans, who raided Italy to prevent Theodoric from coming to the aid of the Visigoths, and the Burgundians under King Gundobad, a Catholic-sympathiser and potential Catholic convert.⁵⁷

After Clovis' death, Brittany shared most, perhaps all, of its land-border with the territory of his son Childebert. This would remain the case until Childebert's death in 558, and the Bretons seem to have accepted him as their suzerain. The early seventh-century Breton *Life of St. Samson* states that the saint interceded with Childebert on behalf of Iudwal, the ex-ruler

⁵⁵ F Barbieri, *History of Britain, 407–597*: available online at Vortigern Studies, British History 400–600: <http://www.geocities.com/vortigernstudies/fabio/contents.htm> (2002) [7 August 2004]. See appendix 12, "More evidence for direct contact between Franks and Celtic Britons, ca. 535."

⁵⁶ It is unlikely that most Alamans were Christian at this time, but they had been firmly under the thumb of the Catholic Franks since 506 and moreover, as Barbieri argues, they were linked to Catholicism by the fact that their conquest by Clovis was the moment of his conversion, according to Gregory Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.30 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.75–76).

⁵⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.34 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.81–82).

of Domnonee (northern Brittany) who had been ousted by Count Cunomorus, probably in the 540s.⁵⁸ Moreover, there is no record of conflict between Childebert and the Bretons.

Indirect evidence of good relations between Childebert and the Bretons comes from Gregory's account of what happened when Childebert died.⁵⁹ Childebert had been sheltering Chramn, the estranged son of his brother Lothar. On Childebert's death, his kingdom fell to Lothar, and Chramn fled to Chanao "Count of the Bretons." Lothar invaded Brittany in 560, but Chanao supported Chramn with his army. If the allies had been successful, the Breton Chanao would have been king-maker for a reunited kingdom of the Franks, and could have expected a commensurate reward. Instead, Lothar prevailed, and Chanao and Chramn were both killed. For many decades thereafter, conflicts between the Bretons and Franks were frequent. Offensive action by the Bretons was restricted to raiding the areas around Rennes and Nantes, which had evidently been annexed by Lothar. It would not be until the ninth century that the Breton kings would reconquer these areas, and beyond.⁶⁰

3 The Frankish political situation in the second quarter of the sixth century

On Clovis' death in 511, the Frankish kingdom was divided among his four sons: Chlodomer, Childebert, Lothar, and Theuderic. Theuderic was the eldest, and held all the land in the north-east, with his capital at Rheims. As well as their sectors north of the Loire, each son had a share of Aquitania. In 524 Chlodomer was killed campaigning against the Burgundians, and some years later his kingdom was divided among his brothers. In c. 531 Theuderic and Lothar conquered the Thuringians.⁶¹ In c. 532 they sent their respective sons, Theudebert and Gunthar, to reconquer some lands in the south that the Visigoths had reoccupied. Gunthar advanced only as far as Rodez, but Theudebert continued into Septimania.⁶² Childebert and Lothar again invaded Burgundy, besieging King Godomar in his northern stronghold of Autun.⁶³ Burgundy fell in

⁵⁸ Chadwick, *Early Brittany*, 252.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 4.20 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.152–154).

⁶⁰ Galliou and Jones, *The Bretons*, 157–158.

⁶¹ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 3.7 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.103–104).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.21 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.121).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3.11 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.107–108).

534 and was divided between Childebert, Lothar, and Theudebert.⁶⁴ The last of these had succeeded his father Theuderic in the same year, and received the largest share, including the north.⁶⁵ Provence was soon after ceded by the Ostrogoths, and these three kings partitioned it in *c.* 537. In 539, and again in 546, Theudebert even invaded Italy. He was clearly the most powerful of the Frankish kings at this time, and Procopius called him simply “ruler of the Germans.”⁶⁶

To offset this picture of Frankish co-operation and expansion,⁶⁷ there is a grim record of civil war and treachery.⁶⁸ Theuderic tried to murder Lothar while they were on campaign in Thuringia. When Theuderic was (wrongly) rumoured to have died there, probably in an earlier campaign of *c.* 525,⁶⁹ Childebert seized some of his territory (the Auvergne), hastily evacuating it when the falsehood was exposed. Chlodomer’s young sons were personally murdered by Lothar, in Childebert’s presence. When Theuderic did die, in 534, Childebert and Lothar “joined forces against

⁶⁴ Marius of Avrenches, *Chronica* (Th. Mommsen [ed.], *Chronica Minora Saec. IV.V.VI.VII*, vol. 2, MGHAA 11 [Berlin: Weidmann, 1894], 235).

⁶⁵ Gregory of Tours places the siege of Autun between the conquest of Thuringia and the reconquest of southern Gaul, but his ordering of events at this time (before his birth) is unreliable. Marius of Avrenches places the fall and partition of Burgundy in the consulate of Paulinus (1 September, 533 to 31 August, 534), and it must have taken place in 534 since Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 3.23 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.122–123), says Theudebert succeeded his father in the twenty-third year of the latter’s reign (beginning in December, 533). Gregory seems to be correct in ascribing the downfall of the Burgundian kingdom to the siege of Gudomar in Autun, since Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 1.13.3 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.71), also says “...the Germans made an attack upon the Burgundians...and defeating them in battle confined their leader in one of the fortresses of the country and kept him under guard, while they reduced the people to subjection ... and the whole land they made subject and tributary to themselves.” Thus the siege of Autun probably began in late 533 or early 534. These details will become relevant in sec. 4.3. See R. van Dam, “Merovingian Gaul and the Frankish Conquests,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 1: *c.* 500–*c.* 700, ed. Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 193–231, at 199.

⁶⁶ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 1.13.4 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.71).

⁶⁷ Detailed in James, *The Franks*, 91–108.

⁶⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 3.7 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.105); 3.9–10 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.106–107); 3.18 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.117–119); 3.23 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.122–123); and 3.28 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.124–125).

⁶⁹ James, *The Franks*, 94.

Theudebert and did what they could to seize his kingdom. He bought them off and with the help of his *leudes* [nobles] established himself on the throne.”⁷⁰ Some years later Theudebert and Childebert invaded Lothar’s kingdom, intending to kill him; he was saved only by a literally awful hailstorm.

According to Procopius, the migration of Britons to Gaul continued up to the time of his writing, supposedly accompanied by Angles and Frisians.⁷¹ They were settled “in the part of their [the Franks’] land which appears to be more deserted, and by this means they say they are winning over the island [Britain].” Procopius links this Frankish claim to sovereignty over Britain to an embassy to Justinian, by “the king of the Franks,” probably Theudebert (534–548), or his son Theudebald (548–555). Since Procopius’ account was no doubt influenced by the Frankish embassy it is particularly doubtful.⁷² Nevertheless, it at least raises the possibility that in the 530s Britons were settling not only in Armorica, but also in the realms of Theudebert.

4 *Vita sancti Dalmatii*—translation and interpretation

4.1 The manuscript

Saint Dalmatius, or Dalmas as he is now known, was bishop of Rodez in southern France from before 534 until his death in 580.⁷³ *Vita sancti Dalmatii* was written in Rodez in the late eighth or early ninth century.⁷⁴ Below I reproduce the first two sentences from paragraph 6 of Krusch’s transcription,⁷⁵ with two corrections based on my reading of a reproduction of the earlier of two surviving manuscripts,⁷⁶ from the tenth

⁷⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 3.23 (MCHSSrer.Merov. 1/1.123).

⁷¹ Procopius, *De bello Gothico* 4.20.7–10 (Haury, *Procopii*, 2.590–591). English translation in H.B. Dewing, *Procopius*, vol. 5: *History of the Wars, Books VII (continued) and VIII*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928).

⁷² Thompson, “Procopius,” 501–502, although one need not agree with his opinion that the Frankish king’s embassy was so poorly understood by Procopius that it was actually asserting his sovereignty over Brittany.

⁷³ Krusch, *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*, 543.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 544; and C. van de Kieft, “Index Fontium,” in *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, vol. 2, ed. J.F. Niermeyer and C. van de Kieft (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 46.

⁷⁵ *Vita sancti Dalmatii* 6 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 3.546).

⁷⁶ Paris, BnF, Latin 17002, fol. 131v.

century,⁷⁷ in square brackets. The *legio Bretonum* appears in the second sentence:

(6) Scilicet posteaquam pia atque inclita et Christiane religionis cultrix Francorum ditio Rutenam urbem, coniurante sibi populi eius favore, subiecit, desiderio refectus [refertus] pontifex Christiani regis Theodoberti tendebat videre praesentiam. Cumque ad illum devotissimus ardue festinaret in Ultralegeretanis [ultralegeretannis] partibus quodam loco, ubi aliqua, ut dicam, prope legio bretonum manet, vespertinam ospitalitatem habuisse narratur.

The most difficult word in the above is *ultralegeretannis*. It is easy to see how *legeretannis* could have arisen by a scribal error from *legerecanis*, a natural variation on *ligericanis*—“pertaining to the *ligericus*.” This last is the Roman name of the Loir,⁷⁸ a minor river to the north of the Loire. A less recherché reading of *legeretannis*, albeit one requiring the assumption of considerably more scribal corruption, is as *ligeranis*—pertaining to the *ligeris* (the Loire itself).⁷⁹ The obscurity of the Loir makes it an unlikely geographical reference for locating a miracle by a saint from Rodez, so it seems more likely that “north of the Loire” is what is meant.

Fleuriot translated the above passage, and epitomised the last sentence of paragraph 6 and the first of paragraph 7.⁸⁰ However, to interpret the passage properly it is necessary to consider more of the text. In the translation below, square brackets indicate my clarifications.

(6) Naturally, after the realm of the Franks [who were] pious and illustrious and devotees of the Christian religion, had subjugated the city of Rodez (the people themselves conspiring in their [the Franks'] favour), the priest [Dalmas], filled with desire, strove to look upon the presence of the Christian king Theudebert. As the devout one [Dalmas] was tirelessly hurrying to him [Theudebert] in the region beyond-Loire [or: beyond-Loir], it is said he enjoyed an evening's hospitality in a certain place where some sort of Breton [or: Brittonic] legion (so to speak) nearby was stationed [or: was waiting]. While celebrating Mass on the following day a certain girl vexed by evil spirits ran up to him. While she was raving in various cruel manners, at length

⁷⁷ Krusch, *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*, 544.

⁷⁸ P.G.W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁷⁹ This reading is the one adopted in an earlier transcription: A. Toulemouche, *Histoire Archéologique de l'Epoque Gallo-Romaine de la ville de Rennes* (Rennes: Deniel, 1847), 288. This transcription also has *refertus* rather than *refectus*.

⁸⁰ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 272.

that most wicked madness which is companion of the demon cried out through her mouth: "Tell me, Dalmas, since being now overcome by the tortures you are inflicting on us we can no longer remain here, from which part of that body, in which I am being assailed, I may come out."...[Finally] this cruel enemy betook himself to the place of digestion, approached a place worthy of himself, and came out from there. Indeed he filled the place in which sacred rites were being paid to our eternal king with such a great stink of farting that the only possible conclusion was that the devil had emerged from there. The rest of her body was unharmed, and so demonstrated the glory of Saint Dalmas for all to see. For, in like manner, on returning the glorious priest came upon in that same place a high-roofed church built by the inhabitants of the place, matching his virtue.

(7) Not long afterwards, summoned to the city of Orléans for an assembly of the synod, the saint hurried there. And since his journey lay through the territory of the city of Bourges [i.e. Berry], he came to Bourges.

(8) Then, after departing from the city of Orléans, he went to the church of Saint Martin.⁸¹

This report of the Breton legion neither implies ownership of any particular territory by Bretons or Franks, nor hints at the political or religious allegiance of any Bretons. Thus it has no apparent bearing on Carolingian political or ecclesiastical matters at the time of its composition. In what follows I therefore adopt the position that the report is a genuine witness of a sixth-century incident, and turn to its interpretation.

4.2 When and where did Dalmas encounter the *legio Bretonum*?

The incident involving the Breton legion clearly took place after the Franks (indeed, possibly Theudebert himself) had recaptured Rodez from the Visigoths in c. 532 (see sec. 3 above), and after Theudebert became king in 534. Dalmas attended a church council in Clermont-Ferrand in 535,⁸² and this would have taken him northwards towards Theudebert's capital. The *vita* emphasises what a hurry he was in to see Theudebert, suggesting that he journeyed to Rheims in 534 or 535. As a *terminus ante quem*, we have the synod at Orléans attended by Dalmas—the fourth synod, in

⁸¹ *Vita sancti Dalmatii* 6–8 (MGHSSrer.Merov. 3.546-547). This is partially based upon an unpublished English translation by J. Holland (personal communication).

⁸² Krusch, *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*, 545.

541.⁸³ Again, the *uita* has Dalmas summoned there “not long after” returning to the place where he had encountered the Breton legion, presumably after he had seen Theudebert, but this phrase appears merely as a device to begin a new episode (another exorcism) in the *uita*. All one can conclude for sure is that the incident took place between 534 or 541 (though more probably near 534), somewhere north of the Loire.

These uncertainties must be contrasted with the precise (but divergent and in places simply wrong) information Fleuriot provides.⁸⁴ In different places in *Les origines de la Bretagne* he states: “around 530 a *legio Britannica* was still stationed near Orléans”; “the *legio Britannica* near Orléans in 533”; “a *legio Bretonum* near Orléans around 540”; “around 535, Dalmas ... encountered not far from Orléans a *legio Britannica*”; and finally, a *legio Britannica* is shown just to the north-west of Orléans on map 10. Fleuriot gets the descriptor right only once, on 272. Unfortunately, it was not this instance that was picked up by Galliou and Jones, but rather the first, on 180, which gives the obviously incorrect date of 530 as well as the incorrect *Britannica*. This description (“British”) suggests an insular origin for the army. By contrast *Bretonum*⁸⁵ is an ethnic description, rendered most naturally as “Breton,” although “Brittonic” is a valid alternative.

Fleuriot justifies his placing of the legion near Orléans from the fact that “not long after” returning to the site of the incident, Dalmas arrived in that city.⁸⁶ This interpretation would require taking *Nec longo post tempore* to mean a matter of hours, or at most days, later. This is not at all implied by the text, as discussed above. Even more seriously, Fleuriot’s interpretation relies on a misreading of the text, which merely says that he was *summoned* to Orléans at that time, not that he *arrived* there. Moreover, the translation above makes it clear that his journey to Orléans took him by necessity through Berry, close to Bourges. This would not be the case if Dalmas was travelling to Orléans from a nearby site north of the Loire. It is

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 180, 254, 272, 303, and 272. Carelessness would seem the only explanation for the divergent dates, only one of which, on 272, is explained by Fleuriot.

⁸⁵ Or *Brethonum* as it appears in the fifteenth-century manuscript. See Krusch, *Passiones vitaeque sanctorum aevi Merovingici*, 546.

⁸⁶ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 272.

surely most likely that he was travelling from his see in Rodez, in which case the direct route would certainly pass by Bourges.

Thus, unfortunately, the information in the *vita* about the Synod of Orléans tells us nothing definite about the date or location of the incident with the Breton legion. However, it does tell us that in order to go to Orléans in 541, Dalmas travelled by land, presumably the fastest route from Rodez since he was allegedly in a hurry. This suggests that in hurrying to see King Theudebert he also travelled in a bee-line from Rodez to Rheims, which would have crossed the Loire into the northern parts of the kingdom of Burgundy, east of Bourges. Since Dalmas evidently returned to the same place on his way home to Rodez, this increases the likelihood that his route was a direct one. In particular, a sea voyage from Bordeaux to Nantes at the mouth of the Loire, the only route that would have taken him into Brittany, seems improbable. Thus, based on the information in the *vita*, the most likely location for Dalmas to have encountered the *legio Bretonum* was northern Burgundy.

4.3 Was the *legio Bretonum* a military force?

As mooted in the introduction, the word *legio* need not have a military connotation at all. Dalmas' encounter is immediately followed by an exorcism, which invites comparison with the (rather more dramatic) exorcism performed by Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where: "He asked [a man possessed]: 'What is thy name?' And he answered, saying, 'My name is Legion: for we are many.'"⁸⁷ In both exorcisms the demon, via the mouth of the possessed person, talks of itself in both the singular and plural in the same sentence. A metaphorical reading of *legio* in *Vita sancti Dalmatii* is also suggested by the qualifiers that precede it: *aliqua* ("some sort of") and *ut dicam* ("so to speak"), although it is not clear what the latter is meant to qualify.

If St Dalmas' *legio* is to be interpreted as a demon, then we should translate *manet* as "waiting"—while Dalmas was enjoying an evening's hospitality, the demonic legion was lurking nearby in the girl who ran up to him in the morning. If this is the correct reading, however, then the description *Bretonum* for the demon is, as far as I know, without precedent

⁸⁷ Mark 5:9. The term "legion" (*legio* in the Vulgate) is also used in the version in Luke 8:30.

on the continent.⁸⁸ The only plausible explanations are that the girl spoke in Brittonic or that the incident took place in Brittany. The absence of further clarification in the *vita*, despite the detailed description of the girl's/demon's speech and actions, raises doubts about the first explanation. As for the second explanation, other evidence makes a location in Brittany unlikely, as argued in sec. 4.2. Thus there are good reasons to consider the alternative (military) interpretation of *legio*.

Fleuriot identifies the *legio Bretonum* with the Roman soldiers who, according to Procopius, still belonged to their ancient legions at this time (see sec. 2.3).⁸⁹ This identification would seem to be based solely on the word *legio*. However, as a military term, it almost certainly meant nothing more than “a body of troops” to an author writing around the time of Charlemagne.⁹⁰ Again, the qualifier *aliqua*—omitted by Fleuriot in his translation⁹¹—warns against taking *legio* literally. If the *legio Bretonum* was a military force, then it is a possibility that, as Fleuriot asserts, it was numbered among the “Roman” forces that switched their allegiance to the Franks in the late fifth century. But there are other, far more likely, possibilities, explored in the following section.

4.4 If military, what was the origin and mission of the *legio Bretonum*?

If the *legio Bretonum* was a military force, then its presence close to where Dalmas stayed the evening before the exorcism is entirely incidental to his deeds. Presumably, therefore, it was remembered by Dalmas, and recorded by his hagiographer, because it was a notable occurrence. This

⁸⁸ Interestingly, there is a precedent in Britain, in an incident recorded not long after it occurred in the early eighth century in Felix, *Vita sancti Guthlaci* 34 (B. Colgrave [trans.] [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956], 110–111). In it St Guthlac was attacked by a crowd of demons speaking in Brittonic. However, the role of the Britons vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxons in Britain was very different from that of the Bretons vis-à-vis the Franks in southern Gaul. The Anglo-Saxons had fought the Britons for some two centuries to conquer England, and the latter were still regarded as “the implacable enemies of the Saxon race, ... troubling the English with their attacks, their pillaging, and their devastations of the people” (108–109).

⁸⁹ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 180.

⁹⁰ R. Abels and S. Morillo, “A Lying Legacy: A Preliminary Discussion of Images of Antiquity and Altered Reality in Medieval Military History,” *Journal of Medieval Military History* 3 (2005), 1–13, at 6.

⁹¹ Fleuriot, *Les origines*, 272.

would not have been the case if it were located in Brittany, but would have been if it was located in northern Burgundy, as I have suggested.

If Dalmas encountered the *legio* after the Frankish partition of Burgundy in 534 then he would probably have been within Theudebert's territory all the way from Rodez to Rheims (or other Austrasian centres in the north). In this case the *legio Bretonum* was presumably in Theudebert's service. Procopius' report of migration from Britain to the lands of the Franks (see sec. 3) suggests one way by which Theudebert, as "king of the Franks," could have had a body of Brittonic soldiers stationed on his soil.

Several other possibilities arise if the incident took place in the year 534, which is quite likely (see sec. 4.2). The *legio* might have been an army from the kingdom(s) of the Bretons, ordered by their overlord Childebert towards Theudebert's territory as part of the attempt by Childebert and Lothar to seize their nephew's kingdom (see sec. 3). Alternatively, it might have been aiding the two western Frankish kings in their siege of Autun and the subsequent conquest of Burgundy in 534 (see sec. 3). Indeed, these two possibilities may not be separable—Childebert and Lothar might have been in a position to try to prevent Theudebert's rise to the throne only because they already had forces in the east, in northern Burgundy.⁹² On the other hand, the *legio* may have been in Theudebert's service (as above), helping to counter his uncles' rapacity, or helping to conquer his share of Burgundy. Finally, it is worth remembering that Riotimus and the

⁹² It cannot go unremarked that this is also the general location, and is quite close in time to the year (541), of King Arthur's second Gallic war, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (*HRB*) (M. Reeve [ed.] and N. Wright [trans.], *Geoffrey of Monmouth: The History of the Kings of Britain*, Arthurian Studies, vol. 49 [Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007]). In *HRB*, the Britons march from Armorica towards Autun (*HRB* 166 [Reeve, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 229]), following Arthur's plan to confront the Romans in Burgundy (*HRB* 162 [Reeve, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 221]). They find the Romans further north and fight three battles in the general vicinity of Langres (*HRB* 166–168 [Reeve, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 229, 231, 233, and 235]), in northern Burgundy. The victorious Arthur then reduces the cities of Burgundy (*HRB* 176 [Reeve, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 248–249]), over the winter before his return to Britain in 542 (*HRB* 178 [Reeve, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 253]). C. Gidlow, *The Reign of Arthur* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 2004), 304–305 identifies a handful of elements in *HRB* suggesting that Geoffrey had a lost Breton source, chief amongst them being the locations of the three battles in northern Burgundy. Whether this conclusion can be substantiated, and whether some lost Breton record of Dalmas' *legio Bretonum* could have helped inspire this part of Geoffrey's pseudo-history, are issues beyond the scope of this paper.

remnants of his army fled from Bourges to Burgundy following his defeat by Eurich (see sec. 2.2). These men might have formed a *legio Bretonum* in Burgundian service, with their still-serving descendants ordered to resist the Frankish military advance in 534.

5 Conclusion

The *Vita sancti Dalmatii* of c. 800 may be a unique piece of evidence for Brittonic military activity in Gaul proper in the second quarter of the sixth century. Because the Brittonic connection appears entirely incidental to the deeds of the saint, and has no obvious relevance to Carolingian public affairs, there is no reason to think it untrustworthy. Recent histories, following Fleuriot, have incorrectly reported it as a record of a *legio Britannica* (British legion), stationed near Orléans, in c. 530. In actuality, the *vita* records a *legio Bretonum* (Breton or Brittonic legion), somewhere north of the Loire, and implies a date between 534 and 541. Moreover, it seems that prior commentators have missed or ignored the—arguably more plausible—interpretation of *legio* as a demonic rather than military force. It is only by consideration of all the evidence in the *vita* that a cogent case can be made for Dalmas having encountered a Brittonic army, most likely in northern Burgundy, and quite likely in 534.

The historical background, in sections 2 and 3 of this paper, shows that, although notable, such an encounter with a Brittonic army in northern Burgundy would not be astonishing. The contemporary Frankish political situation, described in sec. 3, could have opened many opportunities for service by Brittonic soldiers in this area, as discussed in sec. 4.3. Sections 2.1–2.3 reviewed the evidence that Britons undertook a number of military operations in Gaul proper in the second half of the fifth century, and might have ruled substantial areas between the Loire and Seine in the 490s. Section 2.4 examined what the sources imply for the situation after Frankish expansion had confined the Britons to western Armorica. Following Clovis' conversion, the Armorican Britons recognized Frankish suzerainty (until the death of his son Childebert in 558) and helped their coreligionists achieve their domination of Gaul in the early sixth century. By the time of Dalmas' encounter with the *legio Bretonum*, the Britons had become, in Frankish myth, a kindred people, along with the Alamans and Romans. So even though it does not allow us to conclude anything certain about Brittonic military activity, *Vita sancti Dalmatii* does serve to focus our attention on the neglected role of the Britons in the process of transition from late antique Gaul to early medieval Francia.