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CraftCambro-Latin Compositions: Their Competence and Craftsmanship

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DAVID HOWLETT, *Cambro-Latin Compositions: Their Competence and Craftsmanship.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998. Pp. ix, 170; tables and diagrams. Distributed in the U.S. by ISBS, 5804 N.E. Hassalo St., Portland, OR 97213.

David Howlett, Rhodes scholar and editor-in-chief of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources,* continues to invent medieval learning on his own terms. In this Turkish beehive on Welsh-Latin writings from the fourth century to the twelfth, Howlett charges that inscriptions, historiography, *orationes, vitae,* and hexameter verse were composed according to alphanumeric designs. While offering fine translations of Cambro-Latin writings alongside some credible philological and rhetorical analyses, Howlett's study ultimately promotes a hubristic pretense: except for the author, all readers of Cambro-Latin writings are guilty of "misprising" them by disregarding their "craftsmanship" (i.e., numerological composition). Frequently prefacing the analyses are accusations like "no work has suffered more ignorant misprision and unjust detraction" (p. 84). Yet Howlett's science does not justify these exuberant reproaches: his analytical system really comprises a host of arbitrary procedures whose contingent premises go unexamined.

To illustrate Howlett's method, let us explore his claims about the Carausius Stone, dated to ca. 500. The inscription reads: "CARAVSIVS / HIC IACIT / INHOCCON / GERIESLA / PIDVM." Reading *iacet* for *iacit, hac* for *hoc,* and *congerie* for *congeries,* we could translate the inscription, "Carausius lies here in this pile of stones." However, finding the grammar perfectly satisfactory, Howlett reads, "Carausius—here he lies in this—a pile of stones," or "Carausius lies here in this—a pile of stones." He justifies this clumsy translation by reversing certain syllables and producing a "dactylic hexameter with faultless quantities" (p. 18) that, nevertheless, makes no sense: "VM LAPID ES GERI CON HOC IN IACIT HIC IVS AVS CAR." The trick only works if one "[keeps] the eight long syllables discrete and the four pairs of two short syllables clustered"; otherwise we would have to read, "VM PID LA ES . . ." Several objections immediately occur to me. If the author of the epigraph really had a "knowledge of rules deep enough to play with them" (p. 19), why would he write such an awkward inscription in the first place? And what tells us to read the inscription in reverse? And to invert only *some* syllables? Finally, what is the point of "VM LAPID ES GERI . . ."? Was Carausius a contrary fellow?

Howlett builds an even more complex argument when discussing the prayers of the seventh-century Welshman Moucan, particularly *Oratio IX:* "At the end of the entire composition *Oratio IX* fixes the text in several ways. It contains twenty-eight lines, exactly the number of words in the conclusions to all nine prayers. . . . It contains 164 words and 366 syllables and 797 letters. The numbers of words and syllables may represent the number of leap years, 164, of 366 days in the year of composition, A.D. 656. The number of letters, 797, equals the number of words in the entire composition, 797" (p. 67). Setting aside the problem that reckoning by dominical Incarnation was introduced in the British Isles after Moucan wrote, I seriously doubt that Moucan's spelling was consistent. To arrive at 797 letters Howlett has to render *ae* as *e.* (I should mention here that the opposite procedure is employed for Faustus of Riez [fl. fifth century] and Rhygyfarch ap Sulien [d. 1099]: *e, ę,* and *æ* get turned into *ae.*) But even reducing the diphthong would not give us 797 letters, and Howlett is led to pare a few more characters from Christo (>Xpisto) and Ihesu (>Iesu). He then suggests that the coincidences he has engineered prove that the text is accurately transmitted: the fact that 797 letters in *Oratio IX* match 797 words in the collection of prayers is allegedly planned.

Observe how flexible such numerical analyses can be in Howlett's hands. A discussion of the *Historia Brittonum* cites wordplay on the number 28, where "the author . . . wrote twenty-eight words before *uiginti octo ciuitates*" (p. 74). Howlett later reasons that this strategy was transparent to the "Vatican" redactor of the *Historia Brittonum,* who

"[makes] the last of *triginta tres ciuitates* the thirty-third word of his paragraph" (ibid.). In one case, 28 words *precede* the word *uiginti,* but *ciuitates* is the 33rd word in a paragraph. The logic escapes me here and elsewhere: "there are six words after *sex menses* [page 86, line 22]. In the tenth sentence there are in the second clause six words before *sex* [page 86, line 26]" (p. 93). I think that Howlett has *sex* on the brain, since 7 words can be said to follow *sex* in line 22, and 15 words follow *sex menses* in line 26.

Howlett employs an arsenal of techniques to locate numerological wordplay in the texts he analyzes. One can count, multiply, or factor punctuation marks, spaces (between, before, and after words), letters, digits, syllables, words, lines, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs, inclusive and exclusive, forwards or backwards, in texts and partial texts. Texts can be divided into units by certain (meaningful?) ratios, producing even more grist for the mill, or references to people ("the number of peoples in the Hebrew [!] text of Genesis XI," p. 74), places, and events can be quantified. Once the numbers are generated, they can be endlessly manipulated to

a. reveal dates (of composition, of birth [of the author, patron, fictional or historical character], of age at the time of writing, of important events): "From the space before *Duodecim fuit bellum in monte Badonis* to the space after *Amen* inclusive there are 496 letters and spaces between words, A.D. 496 being the year of the battle of Mount Badon and the year of the birth of Gildas" (p. 82); "From *Vita Sancti David* to *a Giraldo digestam* inclusive there are thirty-four syllables, suggesting that Gerald composed the work when he was thirty-four years old" (pp. 140–41).

b. highlight personal or divine names (in Latin or Greek): "From *Sanctae Mariae* to *Sanctae Mariae* there are 152 letters, the value of the name MAPIA in Greek alphabetic numerical notation being 40 + 1 + 100 + 10 + 1 or 152. From the beginning of the passage to the last word of the eighth sentence, the last of a line of eight words, *eius* [i.e., Iesu] inclusive, there are exactly 888 letters and spaces between words, the value of the name IHCOYC in Greek alphabetic notation being 10 + 8 + 200 + 70 + 400 + 200 or 888" (p. 82).

c. emphasize "craftsmanship": "Note the sequence of letters: SI–IS 1; IN–I–A–IN–I 2; O–O–O 3; AM–U–AN–U 4; I–I–E–E 5; A–I–A 6; C–O–CO 7" (p. 24); "The fiftieth line contains fifty characters, forty-eight letters and two punctuation points" (p. 146).

We should not be surprised at the numeric coincidences, not only because numbers available for interpretation abound but also because Howlett applies his own rules inconsistently. For example, Howlett dissects the "Planctus Ricemarch" by Rhygyfarch: "The ninety lines of the poem divide by one-ninth and eight-ninths at 10 and 80, the 463 words by the same fractions at 51 and 412, by both criteria exactly at *Haec ego Ricemarch,* ten lines and fifty-one words from the end of the poem" (p. 112). Howlett observes that, dividing by word or line, the last of nine equal partitions in the "Planctus" begins with the phrase "I, Rhygyfarch" but that the first one-ninth ends at the 51st word (line 9) or the tenth line (59th word). While this is only true if one omits the final line, "Finit amen," and reconstructs line 61 with two words, the procedure isolates the same word in the *last* partition but not in the *first.* Notwithstanding the problem that the 51st word from the end is *Haec* (line 80) and that the 412th word from the beginning is *fauente* (line 79), why should numbers derived from the opening of a work have relevance for the conclusion, when—by the exact same application—they obviously have none for the opening?

Howlett summarizes some of his principles on the last page of his book. Cambro-Latin texts can exhibit "pictorial images in the words that represent them. . . . [R]ecurrent and varied play, with numerical words which exhibit their meaning by their placement in texts . . . recurrent and varied play with calendrical numbers—7, 12, 19, and 38, 30 and 31, 52, 365 and 366 . . . recurrent and varied play with numbers important for fixing dates of biographical and autobiographical subjects . . . [ensure] the inner coherence of their works

by relating the numbers of discrete elements of composition, variously keying to each other numbers of letters, syllables, words, lines, sentences, and chapters. . . . We see the ratios of cosmic and musical theory by which the authors supposed God had created the universe—symmetry, duple ratio, extreme and mean ratio, sesquialter or hemiolus, sesquitertian or epitritus, sesquioctave epogdous, and division by one-ninth and eight-ninths—in every text considered in this book" (p. 164). Nowhere have I been able to find definitions of these technical terms or evidence that authors thought that musical theory belonged in their writings. On the contrary, many points stated as fact, like the date of the battle of Mount Badon, are inferred from the analyses Howlett undertakes. Finally, the way Howlett describes his mathematical operations grossly exaggerates their relevance, as if wolves and wind are the same because they both howl.

Let me conclude by citing this book's real danger: readers adopting Howlett's methodology might draw unsubstantiated conclusions about literature. For example, Howlett's preface (outlining his studies in compositional numerology) falls seven pages from the beginning of the book (not counting flyleaves) and corresponds exactly to page 163, seven pages from the end of the book (not counting flyleaves). There Howlett cites an anecdote by Gerald of Wales: "On one occasion [Gerald] relates a story about a man who could see spirits, a story he may be suspected of having embroidered, if he didn't fabricate it from whole cloth." One might be tempted to make an inference from this textual architecture, but the phenomenon is purely coincidental in my view.

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Hugo of Santalla, *The "Liber Aristotilis" of Hugo of Santalla,* ed. Charles Burnett and David Pingree. (Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, 26.) London: Warburg Institute, 1997. Paper. Pp. vi, 299; black-and-white frontispiece, 1 black-and-white figure, and tables. £28.

While astrology is now a popular game for the masses, despised by intellectuals, in the twelfth century the situation was vastly different. Early translators from the Arabic such as Hermann of Carinthia and Hugo of Santalla, active in the 1140s, doubted whether they should commit the "intimate treasures of the Arabs (*intimi Arabum thesauri*)" into the hands of the great public. These texts were sometimes kept in "the more secret depths (*inter secretiora bibliothece penetralia*)" of the library; witness Hugo's preface to one of his translations of astrological and astronomical texts. But Arabic science was much in demand, and, especially after the Christian reconquest, a great number of texts were translated and found their way to western Europe. Petrus Alfonsi urged his students in France to learn from the Arabs and to forget about such obsolete texts as Macrobius's *In somnium Scipionis.*

One of the earliest translators of astrological, astronomical, and divinatory texts from the Arabic was Hugo of Santalla from Spain. His translations were dedicated to Michael, bishop of Tarazona, who was himself much interested in Arabic science. Michael and Hugo found their texts at Rota (now Rueda Jalón, between Tarazona and Zaragoza), the capital of the kingdom of the Banū Hūd from 1110 until 1140, when it was ceded to Alfonso VII of Castile. The library of the Banū Hūd, who were known for their patronage of learning, must have been rich in astronomical and mathematical texts, and Michael himself, as Hugo tells us in a preface to his translation of the Ibn al-Muthannā revision of al-Khwārizmī astronomical tables, had searched for manuscripts there. Apart from this translation (which was meant to help Michael understand the new tables), Hugo translated at least six other astrological-astronomical texts (among them works by Māshā'allāh and al-Kindī), three