Langport, the Llongborth of Llywarch Hên's Elegy, and the Site of an ancient British Town of the same name.

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IN the " Elegy upon Geraint ab Erbyn,"* by the Prince-poet, Llywarch Hên, Geraint, the Prince of Dyvnaint, or Devon, is represented as having been slain in the battle of LLONGBORTH. It would appear from the elegy, that the poet was himself present at the engagement, and witnessed the death of his friend and fellow-warrior. The British forces were commanded by Arthur, under the title of Emperor. The name of the Saxon leader does not occur in the poem, but there is reason to believe it was Cerdic, whose progress was so vigorously opposed, on various occasions, by the British chieftain.

The engagement was fierce and bloody. This is evident from the following extracts ; and the whole poem clearly

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* The same Geraint ab Erbyn is the hero of one of the Mabinogion, edited by Lady Charlotte Guest. He was the cousin of King Arthur ; his father, Erbyn, being the brother of Uther Pendragon.

implies that it was a drawn battle, in which all the forces
of the contending parties were engaged :

> " Yn Llongborth gwelais drydar,
>   Ac elorawr yn ngwyar,
>   A gwyr rhudd rhag rhuthr esgar.
>
> " Yn Llongborth gwelais i vrithred
>   Gwyr ynghyd, a gwaed ar draed ;
> ' A vo gwyr i Eraint, brysied !'
>
> " Yn Llongborth y llâs Geraint,
>   Gwr dewr o goettir Dyvnaint,
>   Wyntwy yn lladd gyd a's lleddaint.
>
> " Yn Llongborth llâs i Arthur
>   Gwyr dewr, cymmynynt a dur ;
>   Ammherawdyr, llywiawdyr, llavur.

" At Llongborth I witnessed the noisy tumult,
  And biers with the dead drenched in gore,
  And men blood-stained from the onset of the foe.

" At Llongborth I saw the hurried rush,
  Of men with feet blood-stained,
  (Crying) ' Haste ! ye that be Geraint's men.'

" At Llongborth was Geraint slain,
  The bold warrior of the Woodlands of Dyvnaint,
  Slaughtering the foe as he fell.

" At Llongborth was slain to Arthur,
  Emperor and conductor of the toil of war,
  Valorous men, who with steel hewed down (their foes.)"

The site of this battle has been usually assigned to
Portsmouth.   Dr. Owen Pugh, who published the elegy
with a translation, in 1792, represents Llongborth to be
" some harbour on the south coast, probably Portsmouth."

Mr. Turner, likewise, in his "History of the Anglo-Saxons," considers "this poem as describing the conflict at Portsmouth, when Porta landed."* M. de la Ville-marqué, the distinguished Breton antiquarian, advocates the same opinion.

With all due deference to these high authorities, I would submit that there are considerations of great weight derived from the physical characteristics of the locality ; from incidents mentioned in the poem ; and from the knowledge we have of the relative position sustained, about that time, by the Cymri and the Saxons, which go far to prove that the battle, celebrated by Llywarch Hên, was fought at Langport, in this county, and not at Portsmouth. If this conclusion prove to be well-founded, it follows that Langport occupies the site, and still bears the name of the ancient British town of Llongborth, and that it was a port of some importance, during, if not before, the time of the Roman occupation.

The Celtic *Llongborth*, is compounded of LLONG, a ship ; and PORTH, a haven ; and signifies a port or haven for ships. It is well known that Celtic names of places are, invariably, descriptive. Hence the necessity of ascertaining whether the site of the present town of Langport could ever have answered to the description involved in the word Llong-borth. If it did, then the æstuary now confined (mainly by means of artificial embankments) to Bridgwater Bay, must at one time have extended towards Langport, making that place easily accessible to such vessels as the foreign traders and the inhabitants of the land at that time possessed. Similar, if not greater, changes have taken place in the coast-line of this country, even within the period of historic record.

* His. Ang. Sax., b. iii., c. 3.

The Greek Geographer, Claudius Ptolemæus, deemed the mouth of the river Axe, at Seaton, of sufficient importance to be named in succession with the æstuaries of the Tamar, the Exe, and Portsmouth.* In the present day, the mouth of the river is hardly wider than the vessels which enter through it into the little harbour within. A great bank of shingle, which Leland says was beginning to form in his time, now stretches quite across what was the mouth of the æstuary, and rich pasture lands extend over the flats formerly covered by the sea.

From the Saxon chronicle, we learn that in the year 449, Hengist and Horsa " landed in Britain on the shore which is called *Ypwinsfleet.*" Ebbs-fleet, however, is now an inland spot, at some distance from the sea; and what was the æstuary of the Wanstum, dividing the Isle of Thanet from the main land of Kent, is a shallow brook, although it was once navigable for ships of large burden ; and, even in Bede's time, was three stadia broad, and fordable only in two places. †

With such examples of great physical changes elsewhere ; and considering that Langport is still within reach of the tidal waters ; it is not too much to assume, that it might, thirteen centuries ago, have been a haven for ships.

In Porth-Kery, on the other side of the Severn, and, almost opposite Bridgwater Bay, we have a similar instance of the elevation of the sea-bed. Porth-Kery was a sea-

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* μετὰ τὸ ᾿Οκρινον ἄκρον,——Ταμαρου ποτ. ; ᾿Ισάκα ποτ. ; ᾿Αλαίνου ποτ. ἐκβολαὶ ; Μεγας λιμήν .· κ. τ. λ.

Excerpta de Brit. ex. Scriptoribus Græcis. p. xiii. Monumenta Hist. Britannica.

† Bedæ Hist. Eccles., Lib. I., c. 25.

. . . . a continenti terra secernit fluvius Vantsumu, qui est latitudinis circiter trium stadiorum, et duobus tantum in locis transmeabilis : . .

port of the ancient district of Siluria, frequented by *Keri*, the Sovereign of that district, and a distinguished naval commander. It is now utterly inadequate for the accommodation of shipping. Evidence of the gradual rise of the bed of the æstuary of the Severn, has likewise been afforded by excavations in the Bute Docks, Cardiff; and at Port Talbot, in Glamorganshire, "where ancient harbour conveniences were discovered at considerable depths below the present surfaces."*

The Geological features of the alluvial deposits in the extensive plains on either side of the Poldon hills; the various objects, natural and artificial, which have been found in different places, and at great depths, afford conclusive evidence of similar changes on the English coast of the Bristol Channel.

Thus, we find as far up as Weston Zoyland, Chedzoy, and Middlezoy, which stand upon red-marl prominences slightly raised above the level of the surrounding marshes, banks of sea-sand resting against these slightly elevated lands, in such a way as most clearly to show that they formed the margin of ancient sea-boundaries. In these sand banks, are found the shells of the very same molluscs, which are commonly picked up on our sea shores, and are now living on our coasts; proving the deposit to have belonged to a very recent period.† The same features present themselves at Huntspill, Pawlet, and at Chilton Trinity, near Bridgwater; which would indicate the boundaries of the æstuary on either side. At Chilton, the sand containing the shells, lies at a depth of about two or three feet below the surface of the soil.

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* Iolo MSS. note p. 345.

† Mr. Baker's paper on the Geology of Somerset, Proc. of Society, 1849-50, p. 136.

The bulk of the alluvial deposit in this district, consists of a bluish clay, and sea-silt. Those who have seen in how short a space of time the worked-out clay-pits about Bridgwater are filled up, by the subsidence of the muddy waters admitted from the river Parret, will not be at a loss to comprehend the character of the agencies which, in the course of centuries, would cause a considerable elevation in the surface of the plain throughout.

In a paper on the "formation of Marsh Peat" (read at the Conversazione of the Society at Taunton, January 24, 1853,) by the Rev. W. Phelps, it is stated that "on the banks of the Parret, near Crandon Bridge, the alluvial deposit is from eight to ten feet deep, over the peat; and in digging the foundation for the new bridge at Burrow Bridge, in 1828, the alluvial deposit was 16 feet, and the peat 14 feet in thickness, resting on a bed of marl." Half the rise in the level at Burrow Bridge, so clearly proved by the observations recorded by Mr. Phelps, would be quite enough to account for all the physical conditions which our hypothesis requires.

That these deposits have taken place to some extent, and for a considerable depth, within a comparatively recent period, and during the time that the surrounding country was inhabited by the human race, is very evident from the character of the various objects which have, from time to time, been discovered in the clay-pits and turf-moors.

Mr. Stradling in his valuable paper on the Turbaries,* gives an interesting account of the different antiques discovered by him, in what he styles the bottom of "the Lake," whose waters reached up to Glastonbury. Among those things, evidently of British origin, besides flint-spears, and Celts, he mentions three oars or paddles,

* Vide The Society's Report, for 1849-50, p. 50.

similar in form to those used in the present day by Welsh fishermen, in the management of the coracle; and, also a very large canoe formed from an immense oak, which had been preserved by the peculiar antiseptic properties of the peat, and which was known to the turf-cutters as " Squire Phippen's big ship."

These facts clearly point to a time when the eastern side of the Poldon hills was washed by the waters of a large navigable lake, if not an arm of the sea; and judging from the similarity of position, and the occurrence of somewhat similar remains, there can be no doubt but that a lake, or æstuary likewise existed, at that time, to the west of the Poldon hills, reaching towards Langport.

The trunks and branches of trees; the horns of the forest deer; the bones of the ox and horse, have been found at considerable depths in the clay-pits, in the neighbourhood of Bridgwater. At the old canal basin at Huntworth, animal remains, and even pottery were found mixed with sand, nearly 30 feet beneath the surface.*

In the collection of the late Mr. Baker, there is a curious *brass bolt* which was found in one of the clay-pits; and in the possession of John Browne, Esq., there is an interesting specimen of the gold ring-money, which was dug up at a considerable depth in the silt-deposit. These, with the remains of pottery, are a clear proof that the deposit of the alluvial flats in the district is comparatively recent; and that when the plains west of the Poldon hills constituted the bed of an æstuary, the adjoining shores were inhabited by a race of men not unacquainted with the arts, nor strangers to the use and value of the precious metals.

Those who had an opportunity of witnessing the great

* Proc. of Society, 1849–50, p. 137.

expanse of waters, which during the floods of last winter covered the flats for many miles, could easily realize to themselves the aspect of the country at the time to which we refer; and could not fail to recognize in the earthy matter brought down by inland floods, combined with drift-sand and the silt and mud deposited by the tidal waters of the Severn, causes fully adequate, in the course of centuries, to produce the elevation which has taken place.

Even the Saxon names of some of the places in the district are evidence of the same physical characteristics, and serve as a permanent record of the physical history of that part of the county. Thus we have Weston-*Zoyland*, Ched*zoy*, Middle*zoy*,* occupying those slightly elevated patches of marl before referred to, and all implying the presence of an expanse of water surrounding those localities at the time.

The few British names which have survived, afford a striking confirmation of the views we have advanced. Considering the Poldon as a promontory, standing out between two æstuaries, the one extending to Glastonbury, the other to Langport, no more descriptive name could be given to it than that it bears. *Moel-y-don*, or y Voel-don, easily changed into Poldon. *Moel*, in Celtic, signifies *bare, bald;* hence, applied, in Welsh, to *high exposed points of land;* and in Gaelic, to *promontories.* It forms an element in the name of many mountains in Wales; for example, Moel y Famau, Moel Hebog, y Voel Goch, y Voel Las, &c. In Scotland the same word appears in the *Mull* of Kantyre, the Mull of Galloway, &c. Here, in combination with *don*, a wave, Voel-don, or Poldon, would signify the promontory, or elevated land among the waves. Thus were the Poldon-hills called by the ancient inhabitants of

* Pronounced, Chedzee, Middlezee.

the land; and during the greater part of last winter (1852-3), when the floods were out, the name they bear would not be deemed much less appropriate, or less descriptive.*

Ynys Avallon, the name by which Glastonbury was known to the Cymri, is one which accords with the physical conditions obtaining in this district at the time when Langport, was in fact, as in name, Llongborth; a haven for ships. Ynys Avallon, signifies " the ISLAND abounding in apple trees;" a name peculiarly descriptive of the place, when the Turbaries were as yet in course of formation, and when the warrior's barge and the fisherman's canoe moved over what are now well-tilled fields, and where the golden harvest rises to reward the labours of the husbandman.

These considerations, I submit, remove all the difficulties which might arise from the present physical characteristics of the district, and prove it not only possible, but highly probable, that the situation of Langport, before the time of the Roman occupation, corresponded with the description involved in the name of Llongborth.

The historical question remains still to be answered :—Is Langport the Llongborth of which Llywarch Hên speaks, in the elegy ?

Considering the great obscurity in which the historical events of that period are necessarily involved, the reasons which may be advanced in favour of the affirmative are, I conceive, if not altogether satisfactory, yet of great weight.

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* Since this paper was read, the Rev. F. Warre has suggested that in *Bawdrip* we have a Romano-British name, still further confirmatory of the æstuary theory. Bawdrip stands on the edge of the alluvial deposit, and would really be what its name denotes, a *Bôd* (British), dwelling place, on the *Ripa* (Latin), bank of the æstuary.

The battle of Llongborth is not mentioned by name in any of the Saxon Chronicles, nor are the peculiar circumstances in connexion with any engagement recorded in the Chronicles, such as can be identified with those which Llywarch Hên describes. The only one which has ever been connected with this event, is that which stands recorded in the Saxon Chronicles for A.D. 501.

"This year Porta with his two sons, Bæda and Mela, came into Britain with two ships, at a place called Portsmouth. (Poꝛꞇeꞃ-muða.) They soon landed and slew on the spot a young Briton of very high rank."

Mr. Sharon Turner, assuming, probably, that Langport never could have been a "port" or "harbour for ships," concludes that Llongborth must have been some harbour on the south-coast ; and connecting the death of Geraint with that of the young Briton of noble birth, slain at Portsmouth, he comes to the conclusion that the poem of Llywarch Hên, describes the conflict at Portsmouth when Porta landed.*

This conclusion, however, is not borne out by the circumstances of the case. The mere fact, as recorded, of their "slaying on the spot a young Briton of very high rank," falls far short of sufficient evidence, that this young Briton was Geraint ab Erbin. There can be no doubt that the life of many a British youth of highest rank was sacrificed, during that long and severe conflict.

Further, it does not appear possible, that the crew of *two ships*, (which is all that the Chronicle gives to Porta and his sons on their landing at Portsmouth,) could have offered the amount and kind of resistance, which the details of the battle in the Elegy imply. "They soon landed and slew on the spot"—is the description of a very different

* Turner's History of Angl. Saxons, vol. 1, b. iii. c. 3.

event from that which Llywarch Hên celebrates when he
says ; —

> " Yn Llongborth gwelais drabludd
>   Ar fain, brain ar goludd,
>   Ac ar grân cynran man-rudd.
>
> " Yn Llongborth gwelais i vygedorth,
>   A gwyr yn godde ammorth,
>   A gorvod gwedi gorborth.
>
> " Yn Llongborth gwelais i arvau
>   Gwyr, a gwyar yn dineu,
>   A gwedi gawr garw adneu."

> " At Llongborth I saw hard toiling
>   Amidst the stones, ravens on entrails feasting,
>   And a crimson gash on the chieftain's brow.
>
> " In Llongborth I saw the smoking pile,
>   And men enduring want,
>   And defeat after the feast of plenty.
>
> " In Llongborth I saw the weapons,
>   Of heroes with gore fast dropping,
>   And after the war-shout, a fearful return."

The poem abounds in pictures of this character, which it
is impossible to reconcile with the event hitherto associated
with the battle of Llongborth. We are thus led to the
conclusion that the battle of Llongborth is one of those
many engagements which must have taken place between
the Saxons and the Britons, but are not recorded in any of
the Saxon Chronicles.

Nor will this conclusion, I conceive, be affected by the
views and reasons advanced by M. de la Villemarqué, in his

edition of the Poems of the British Bards of the Sixth Century.*

In the "argument" prefixed to the elegy, this celebrated Celtic scholar, after having referred to the coast of Cornwall as peculiarly favourable for the landing of the Saxon invaders,† adds : "It was there, in A.D. 501, that two ships, under the command of Porta, landed ; and the invaders, in honour of their leader, called the place Port's Mouth, *i.e.* the harbour of Porta."

He then gives it as his opinion, that Llongborth is the same with Portsmouth ; and that the young noble, slain at the landing of Porta, was Geraint ab Erbin. In confirmation of this opinion, he imagines he finds in Llongborth, a literal translation of Portsmouth; taking Llong to be a form of *Llwnc* which he translates, "Mouth."‡

We pass over the geographical error of placing Portsmouth in Cornwall, which evidently arose from the assumed connexion of the event with the Cornish Prince, and merely observe that in the elegy itself, Geraint is described as a

"Warrior brave from the woodlands of Devon ;"

and it is well known that the *Dyvnaint* of the British, as well as the *Dumnonium* of the Romans, included a large part of West Somerset.

According to the best Welsh authorities I have been able to consult, *Llwnc*, signifies the *Swallow*, the *Gullet*, and not the *Mouth*. But even though the etymology were ever so unobjectionable, the explanation of Llongborth,

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* Poèmes des Bardes Bretons du VIe Siècle, &c., par Th. Hersart de la Villemarqué. Paris, 1850.

† " Il y avait sur la côte, à la pointe de la Cornouaille, un endroit favorable aux descentes des Saxons." p. 1.

‡ " Je retrouve dans Longborth, ou plutôt Longport (comme on l'a primitivement écrit) la traduction exacte de Portes-Muthe." p. 2.

which this hypothesis involves, could not fail to prove
unsatisfactory, inasmuch as it cannot, upon consideration,
be thought at all probable, scarcely possible, that a
British Prince, when singing the praises of his friend
and companion in arms, would have adopted and translated
the name which was given by their enemies to the place
where he fell, to do honour to his foe.

Surely there must have been a British name for the
harbour of Portsmouth before the landing of Porta ; and
that, whatever it might have been, would be used by
Llywarch Hên on this occasion, and not the translation of
a Saxon name. Portsmouth is undoubtedly the $M\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\alpha\sigma$
$\lambda\iota\mu\acute{\eta}\nu$ of Claudius Ptolemæus; the Portus Magnus of the
Romans. The first part of the word is, evidently, con-
nected with the harbour, and not with the name of the
Saxon invader.

A strong argument in favour of Langport as the site of
the ancient British town of Llongborth, is presented in the
fact that there is no other place in the kingdom whose
name so closely resembles it in sound.* And as we have
seen that, at one time, it might have been a harbour for
ships, the two names are identical, not only in sound, but
likewise in signification.

Standing as it did, according to our hypothesis, on the
extreme end of an æstuary, it would be at least within
sight of the foaming waters of the rushing tides of the
Severn, and its position would thus agree with the only
other reference to the death of Geraint, in the litera-
ture of that period. It occurs towards the close of the

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* In Domesday Book it occurs in the form of *Lanporth,* and on one
of the coins of Athelstane, LONLPORT. Vide the Rev. T. F.
Dymock's Paper on Somersetshire Coins, in the Pro. of the Soc., 1849-50.
p. 16.

Gododin of Aneurin, another Welsh Bard of the sixth
century.

> " Gereint rac deheu gawr a dodet,
> Lluch gwynn dwll ar ysgwyt,
> Yor yspar llary yor."

" Geraint in the south* raised the shout of war,
At the foaming (or glistening) Loch was the buckler
pierced,
Of the lord of the spear—the gentle lord.

Here *Lluch* would stand for the æstuary of the Parret,
as *Loch* still does for some of the æstuaries opening out of
the larger æstuary of the Clyde.

Another argument in favour of Langport as the site of
the battle of Llongborth, may be drawn from its position
on the confines of the district of Dyvnaint. Supposing
the engagement to have taken place subsequently to that
of Mynydd Badon, near Bath, this would have been a likely
place for the conflict.

According to Mr. Sharon Turner, the battle of Badon
Hill, the greatest and most celebrated achievement of
Arthur, served only to check the progress of Cerdic. The
Saxon was still permitted to retain his settlement in
Wessex, and some of the chronicles quoted by Mr. Turner,
shew that " after many severe conflicts, Arthur conceded
to the Saxons, the counties of Southampton and Somerset;
the latter, however, still contested."†

Hence it would seem probable that the engagement to
which the elegy relates, was one of those in which they
contended for the occupation of this part of Somerset; for

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* Aneurin was a North Briton, to whom this part of the West of
England would be known as the South.

† Turner's Hist. Ang. Sax., b. iii., c. iii., p. 269.

although, according to the *Historia Britonum* of Nennius, the battle of Badon Hill stands as the last of the twelve great battles of Arthur, we find it described as the " *last, almost,*" in the history of Gildas.*

The battle of Badon Hill, according to the Annales Cambriæ,† took place, A.D. 516 ; the battle of Camlan, in which Arthur was mortally wounded, A.D. 537. This would give A.D. 520, or thereabouts, for the date of the battle of Llongborth.

This is the nearest approximation we are able to make to the date of the engagement to which the elegy relates. The fierce endurance and daring hardihood manifested, indicates a struggle for national existence. The actions recorded are those of men fighting almost at their own doors in defence of their households. Such would be the case with the men of Dyvnaint, at Langport ; hence we find the battle-cry in the thick of the fray, was, " Haste ! ye that be Geraint's men !"

The issue of the engagement was doubtful ; we cannot regard it as a decided victory on either side. Judging, however, from such expressions as these—

> " In Llongborth I saw the smoking pile:"

and,

> " In Llongborth I saw the biers
>   With the dead drenched in gore :"

we have reason to infer that the Britons were, at least, left in possession of the field, for such sights are witnessed only *after* a battle.

Such are the reasons which have appeared to me to justify our identifying Langport with the Llongborth

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* Hist. Gildæ. c. 26. . . obsessionis Badonici Montis, *novissimæque ferme* de furceferis non minimæ stragis.

† Mon. Hist. Brit., p 830.

of Llywarch Hên. I now submit them, with the conclu-
sion to which they have led us, to the impartial and careful
investigation of the members of this Society; and while
acknowledging my obligation to previous contributors,
whose papers have already appeared in the Proceedings, it
would not be out of place to call attention to the fact,
that there are very few peculiar and characteristic features
in any locality, whether physical or archæological, which
may not, some time or other, beccme available for the
solution and illustration of historical problems, that would
otherwise remain obscure.

Through the advancement of civilization and the ele-
vating influences of the Christian Faith, great and happy
changes have been brought about in the character and
aspect of society since the period of which this paper
treats. The descendants of the Celt and the Saxon,
instead of waging deadly war against each other, are
merged into one great people, enjoying in common the
blessings of their common social and political privileges.

Much as we rejoice in these changes in the aspect of
society, I confess, nevertheless, that while looking down
from the heights, upon the plains through which the muddy
Parret now flows, I have sometimes wished the aspect of
the country had not changed; and that we could still stand
upon the VOEL-DON, gazing on the expanding æstuaries on
either side, glistening in the sun-light beneath our feet, and
watch the white sails gliding from their entrance at
Combwich, to their ancient destination at Llongborth.

Yet we feel that in the changes of the world there is
progress. The beautiful often gives way to the useful.
Corn-fields rise with their golden harvest from the depths
of the waters. We bow to a higher Power; we acknowledge
and revere the Supreme Wisdom of Him, who overrules
the affairs of men.