The Life and Times of King Arthur

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In the centuries since the Arthurian legend first caught the public imagination, King Arthur has been depicted in many ways. He is most commonly seen as the high Medieval king of 130th, 14th, and 15th century tapestries, paintings, and book illustrations, complete with a court of noble lords and ladies and, of course, the Knights of the Round Table (Figs. 1, 2). To the Victorians he was a Christian hero, while in modern times King Arthur has been the subject of historical novels, musical comedies, and cartoons.

Recently, historians and archaeologists have suggested that a military leader named Arthur may have actually existed, although not as a Medieval king, but as a Romanized Briton of the 5th or 6th century A.D. Thus, a more realistic view of Arthur would dress him in the leather tunic and breeches of a provincial Roman soldier, wearing a woolen cloak fastened with a peanunnlar fibula or brooch and carrying a Roman long sword (Fig. 3).

Historical Background

Britain was a province of the Roman Empire for three and a half centuries, from A.D. 43 to 410. Within Britannia, Roman customs and traditions were adopted and the island was part of a trade network that reached as far east as India. Roman coinage was the common currency, and distinctive pottery that was mass-produced both in Gaul and at various places in Britain was commonly used. Latin was spoken, Roman dress copied, and Roman law enforced, despite the fact that the number of Romans actually living in the province was not great. Only the higher officials, the governor and his staff, were appointed from Rome, and only the inhabitants of certain towns were granted Roman citizenship.

During the 3rd and 4th centuries raids by several groups living outside the Roman Empire became a major problem, threatening the prosperity of those living under the Pax Romana. Three different groups were involved: Picts from northern Scotland, Scotti from Ireland, and various Germanic tribes from the coastal areas of the North Sea. It is generally thought that these groups wished to share in the wealth and prosperity of the Roman Empire. Another possibility is that changing environmental conditions or increasing population made it necessary for them to find new land on which to settle.

In response to these raids, a series of large forts were built by the Romans along both the southeast coast of Britain and the northern and western coasts of the Gallic provinces. This defensive system was garrisoned by a large number of troops, under an officer identified in a later Roman administrative document (the Notitia Dignitatum) as the Comes Litoris Saxonici or Count of the Saxon Shore. Two other officers, the Duces Britanniarum and the Comes Britanniarum, Dux and Count of Britain, respectively, are also mentioned. Although several of the forts listed in the Notitia remain unidentified, others are well known archaeologically, like those at Portchester and Burgh Castle.

In A.D. 367 attacks by all three groups, Picts, Scots and Germans, termed the "barbarian conspiracy," created an overwhelming strain on the defensive ability of the Roman army, and there is widespread evidence of destruction in both town and countryside at this time. By the end of the 4th century the Roman Empire could no longer afford the manpower to defend its British province and the regular troops were withdrawn. As Roman control of the island weakened and finally ceased, trade networks broke down. Archaeologically this is demonstrated by the presence of fewer and fewer Roman coins on late 4th century sites, and a notable decrease in the type and amount of manufactured Roman-style pottery. In general, life in towns was greatly reduced and the culture became less cosmopolitan.

In 410 the Emperor Honorius wrote to the local British town councils telling them to "look to their own defense." To replace the military strength lost by the withdrawal of the Roman army, it is likely that these councils enlisted the aid of Germanic mercenaries who had served as foederati, non-Roman troops who fought under a special treaty with the Roman Empire. Within a short period of time the ranks of these mercenaries were increased by the arrival of new immigrants from the continent.
of Roman and the earlier native British traditions. It is into this period of division between the British west and Germanic east that Arthur, as a Romanized British soldier and leader, can be placed.

The information for this period—identified by most historians as "early Medieval"—comes both from archaeology and from a variety of documentary sources. These sources include land grants, treaties, law codes, and epic poetry, as well as contemporary and later histories and chronicles. In addition, the study of place-names provides useful information about life in this period, identifying some archaeological sites, and suggesting areas where different groups settled.

Arthur as a Historical Figure

There are only a few documentary references to Arthur that historians generally consider reliable. One of the earliest is the Gododdin, composed by one of the great Welsh poets, Aneirin, in about A.D. 600. The poem describes a battle between the British and Angles at Catraic in northern England. One hero fought so bravely and killed so many of the enemy that even the birds of prey feeding on the dead bodies had too much to eat; "he glutted black ravens on the rampart of the stronghold, though he was no Arthur"; that is, Arthur was even greater.

About half a century earlier, in about A.D. 540, the monk Gildas wrote a long sermon or homily castigating five contemporary British "kings" for the religious and moral state of western Britain. In De excidio et conquestu Britanniae ("Concerning the Ruin and Conquest of Britain"), he describes a decisive battle which took place in about A.D. 500, around 40 years prior to the time he was writing. This battle at Mons Badonicus, or Mount Badon, temporarily halted the advance of the Anglo-Saxon invaders. Arthur's name is not, however, mentioned in connection with this battle, or, in fact, anywhere in the text.
work on the events discussed by Gildas. In addition, Bede supplies a name for the superbus tyrannus: Vortigern, which may itself be translated as the Celtic version of "high king" or "outstanding ruler."

By the 6th century the Historia Brittonum, compiled by Nennius, credits Arthur not only with winning the decisive battle at Mount Badon, but with eleven other battles as well. Arthur is identified as dux bellatorum, a title reminiscent of the Roman Dux Britanniarum found in the 4th century. Nennius Dignitatum. A number of attempts to identify the locations of these battles have been made, but there is no general agreement. Those who see Arthur as a local leader suggest the fighting took place in a restricted area, perhaps northern Britain or the southwestern peninsula. Others identify him as military commander over all of Britain, with the battle sites consequently, to be found throughout the country.

The 10th century Annales Cambriae also credit Arthur with winning the battle of Badon in 518, where he "carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders [possibly shield] for three days and three nights" and refers to another battle in 537 at Camlann, in which "Arthur and Modred fell."

A different kind of evidence, personal names recorded in early Medieval documentary sources, also supplies information about the existence of Arthur. The name Arthur itself is derived from Artorius, a Roman family name, and is found on a number of 2nd and 3rd century inscriptions in Britain and other provinces. Four or five Arthur, including a Scottish prince and a Welsh nobleman, are found in the documents for the 6th and 7th centuries, but there are none in the 9th or 10th century records. This suggests the existence of a recent or contemporary hero named Arthur after whom these people were named. It should be remembered, however, that the records for all these centuries are exceptionally uneven; the name Arthur could be more common in the preceding 4th and 5th centuries than the sources we have indicate. The Arthurian legend as it is known today has its basis in the Historia Regum Britanniae ("History of the Kings of England") by the 12th century monk Geoffrey of Monmouth. Its author claimed that it was based on an ancient British source, but it is more likely a combination of Welsh folklore and a fertile imagination and, it must be emphasized, far from an accurate historical document. It is in this work, however, that the main traditions of the Arthurian epic are first set out—Arthur's illegitimate birth; his companions Kay, Bedivere, Lot and Gawain; his wife Guinevere; the wizard Merlin; and Arthur's final fight with Modred, after which he is carried off to the Isle of Avalon. Geoffrey of Monmouth became the primary source for all later writers about Arthur, beginning with Chretien de Troyes' 12th century verse romances, which introduced the Knights of the Round Table.

**The Archaeological Context**

When we turn to the archaeology of 5th and 6th century Britain, there is no evidence at all of the existence of Arthur. This is not surprising, since it is a paradox of archaeology that, although we reconstruct past events and lifeways from the material that individuals leave behind, these individuals are almost always anonymous. We do know quite a bit about this period of time, more than one of its labels, "the Dark Ages," would lead us to believe.
cities. A number of towns in southern and western Britain, including Winchester and Exeter, had parts of their walls rebuilt for public utility, such as the Fort at Wroxton and Gloucester, continued to be used. Villas in the Berkshire, Gloucestershire, and Somerset were inhabited, although we do find changes in use of some of the rooms. Additionally, the archaeological field survey of the country of Gloucestershire suggests that several Roman-British farmsteads may have continued in existence from the 4th century to become Anglo-Saxon mansions in the 7th century.

There is also evidence of continued trade between western Britain and the much contracted Roman Empire. Mass-produced pottery made in the eastern Mediterranean (Fig. 4), North Africa and southern Gaul is found on a number of sites along the western coast of Britain. Some of this pottery is in the form of glossy red tableware, but there are also large amphorae which probably contained wine or oil.

In several cases, archaeologists believe that pre-Roman hillforts were transformed into defensive sites. Many of these hillforts, originally constructed in the 1st millennium B.C., were re-occupied in the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries A.D. They were used for a number of functions, including pagans temples, and as centers, and, of course, as settlements. These settlements are sometimes identified as the "house bases of tribal chieftains," but it is not yet clear what the relationship was between the inhabitants of the hillforts and those living in the surrounding countryside.

**Arthurian Sites**

A number of archaeological sites belonging to this period have been associated in literature with Arthur. Tintagel, on the north coast of Cornwall, is often identified as the site of Arthur's conception and birth (see Fig. 5). The castle, now prominent at the site, was first built in the 12th century and so is much later than the time a historical Arthur may have existed (Fig. 6). However, excavations at Tintagel have uncovered building foundations initially dated, through the presence of imported Mediterranean and southern Gaulish pottery, to the 5th to 7th centuries. The site was identified by the excavator as an early Celtic monastery, with chapel, oratory, guest-house, and scriptorium (Fig. 7), but there is no irrefutable evidence for this; today it is thought to have been a secular site.

At South Cadbury Castle, sometimes called "Caerd-Hameol," the excavation of an Iron Age hillfort has revealed reoccupation of substantial occupation, including the portable imported pottery indicative of a date in the 5th and 6th centuries. One of the major buildings identified was a centrally located large ailed hall (Fig. 8). The ram-portal gateway was substantially rebuilt with a timber framework and dry stone facing (Fig. 9). The size of the fort makes it likely that it was a home to large people, although it is not clear whether this was the case for a large military force or, as the excavator has recently suggested, a refuge for the citizens of the nearby Roman town of Ilchester.

Another Iron Age hillfort, also named Cad-Gong, is located near the town of Congresbury. Nick-named "Caerd-Gong" by its excavators, this site was used to defend the area from the eastern Mediterranean during the 5th and 6th centuries, and was also a 4th century glossy red bowls which had been manufactured under Roman rule in Gaul and may have been passed down through the generations of local families. A number of structures dating to the 5th century were identified, as was an earthwork, divided into three sections. Divided into five sections, the site may have served as a defensive administrative center for smaller surrounding settlements.

Near Castle Dore, a small defended enclosure originally built in the Iron Age, there is an interesting example of a memorial stone of a type used in the first half of the 6th century. The inscription reads: DRUSTANUS HIC IACIT / CUNOMORI FILLIVIS ("Here lies Drustanus, son of Cunomorus"). The father's name, Cunomorus, belongs to a known king of Dumnonia, the kingdom which encompassed the southwestern British peninsula, while the son's name, Drustan, is philologically the same as Tristan, of the Arthurian story "Tristan and Isolde." Although the first version of this story comes from a 12th century Anglo-Norman poem, the legend of Cunomorus has been influenced by the Welsh and Breton sources that suggest an earlier origin.

Excavations at Castle Dore itself have uncovered evidence of rebuilding and rebuilding at some time between the 5th and 6th centuries. Two large timber barns have been identified, one of which may have had a clerestory in the style of a Roman basilica. It has been suggested that the site may have housed 30 to 100 people.

Finally, Glastonbury, through its identification in the literature as the Isle of Avalon, is associated with Arthur's death. A lead seal (Fig. 10) inscribed HIC IACET SEPULCRUM EX ARTHURIUS CUM WNNEVERIA EXOURE SUA SECUNDA IN INSULA AVALONNA, "here lies the renowned King Arthur, with his wife of the island of Avalon," was supposedly found during the excavation of a coffin at Glastonbury, and is associated with the Abbey in the 12th century (Fig. 11). The supposed identity of Arthur and his heiress is sufficiently clear that the site became famous in the 12th century as the Atlantis of the British Isles. Yet, it is not clear whether this site was ever a true island; it is more likely a 12th century churchyard trying to imitate a 6th century one. There is no archaeological evidence of 5th or 6th century activity of any type, including that characteristic of imported pottery, anywhere on the abbey grounds. On Glastonbury Tor above the Abbey, however, excavations have uncovered another fortified settlement of 5th to 6th century date. The traces of timber buildings were found, as well as hearths, pottery sherds from imported Mediterranean tableware, and a huge quantity of animal bones, including joints of beef, mutton, and pork.

**Was There an Arthur?**

By about A.D. 650 the period of British resistance was at an end. Much of Britain had yielded to the invading Angles-and-Saxons, leaving the native population in control of only southwest Britain, Wales, and Scotland. Although Britons certainly continued to live in Britain, they are no longer identifiable as a distinct group in the archaeological record. Anglo-Saxon settlements, with distinctive house-types and artifacts, are increasingly common. A new language was spoken and the country had a new name, England.

What, then, can we say about Arthur? There is reasonable, although scanty, evidence that there was a British military leader named Arthur in the late 5th or early 6th century. It is impossible, however, from the surviving records to accurately determine what this man's role might have been. It also appears from the archaeological record, that, as some of the Arthurian documents suggest, life in western Britain continued in many of the same ways as previously, for a period of about 100 years after the end of Roman rule. Can these two be related? Perhaps it is best to echo one of the British archaeologists who has dealt with the Arthurian question: "either you believe in it or you don't."