

Kirk Thomas

Dr. Karen Jankulak

The Celtic Arthur: Arthur in early Celtic history and tradition

Essay MAAS0120-3(b): Does the *Historia Brittonum* and its possible sources imply the early historicizing of a legendary figure or the early accretion of legendary material around an arguably historical figure?

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By the time that the *Historia Brittonum* was written, in Latin, around 829-30, there was already a strong tradition of an historical person by the name of Arthur who had led the beleaguered forces of the Romano-British peoples against the invading hoards of Angles, Saxons and others back in the fifth century. According to the *Historia Brittonum*, this man, who is not named as a king or with any title other than ‘warrior’¹, but who was said to have fought alongside the kings of the British, won twelve battles against the Saxon king Oetha, son of Hengest. In the last of these battles, at Badon Hill, Arthur reportedly killed 960 men in a single day, single-handedly. As a result of these battles, the defeated Saxons sent for more men and kings from Germany to join them in eventually taking the country.²

But elsewhere in the document, there is also a section entitled ‘The Wonders of Britain’ (*de Mirabilibus Brittanniae*³) which is clearly mythological in character. In paragraph 73, Arthur is mentioned in two different accounts: in one, his hound Cafal (*Cabal* in the Latin⁴) left a footprint in a stone during the hunt for the great boar Twrch Trwyth; and in the other, the warrior Arthur’s son Amr has a tomb that can change in size from 6 feet to 15 feet long.⁵

From this, it is clear that Arthur’s dual nature, as man of history and of mythology, was firmly established by the 9th century.

A ‘Heap’ of Sources

¹ J. Morris (ed. and trans.), *Nennius. British History and The Welsh Annals. Arthurian Period Sources vol. 8* (Chichester, 1980), 42.

² *Ibid.*, 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

The Preface to the *Historia Brittonum*, written by one Nennius, describes the methods he claims to have used in writing the manuscript. He says:

I have therefore made a heap of all that I have found, both from the Annals of the Romans and from the Chronicles of the Holy Fathers, and from the writings of the Irish and the English, and out of the tradition of our elders.⁶

This implies that there should not necessarily be any rhyme or reason to the materials found in the *Historia Brittonum*, and that we should only be presented with a collection of historical records taken from a variety of sources.

But was Nennius actually the author of the *Historia Brittonum*? Not all of the copies we have of the *Historia* are ascribed to him. In fact, only five of them are, and it has been argued that they actually are no older than the mid-eleventh century. Nearly 30 copies are ascribed to Gildas, with little foundation, merely because he was the only early British historian whose name had survived. Only some four manuscripts, called the ‘Harleian’ recension, are the ones that most scholars agree actually preserve the text as it would have been in 829-30, and this recension has no Preface or other indications of authorship.⁷ It is therefore a good possibility that the document was only attributed to Nennius at a later date, or perhaps he may have been the redactor of a recension written later than the ‘Harleian’ one, though the Nennius version was probably based upon it.⁸ This begs the question of whether or not the *Historia Brittonum* is just a ‘heap’ or something else altogether.

A look at the text of the *Historia Brittonum* shows us that it attempts to cover the entire sweep of the history of Britain, from a listing of the Six Ages of the World, to the origins of the British and the Irish, through the Roman period and the aftermath of their leaving Britain, the reign of Vortigern, the lives of selected Saints, the campaigns of Arthur, and the history of the North of Britain, covering the years from the creation of the world to approximately the end of the 7th century. This was quite an undertaking.

One of the main primary sources that would have been used for the *Historia Brittonum* may have been the *De Excidio Britonum*, written in Latin by Gildas in about 540 CE or just

⁶ J. Morris, 9.

⁷ D.N. Dumville, “‘Nennius’ and the *Historia Brittonum*”, *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975/76), 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

before, when he was 43 years old.⁹ In this document, Gildas gives a history of Britain from the time of the Romans through to his own time, and is the only near contemporary history we have of the 5th and early 6th centuries in Britain.

Gildas tells us that in the last days of Roman rule in Britain, when it was ‘Roman in name but not by law and custom’, the islands ‘cast forth a sprig of its own bitter planting’¹⁰ in the person of the tyrant Maximus who was raised to the imperial purple by his own troops. Through his cunning, he managed to turn neighboring provinces against Rome and attached them to his own kingdom, moving his capital to Trier. Though he managed to drive an emperor off the throne at Rome, he was defeated and executed at Aquileia (near modern Venice). By the 9th century, many British royal houses would trace their ancestry to Maximus. This point will be addressed later.

The upshot of Maximus’ campaigns, as far as Gildas was concerned, was that he had removed the legions from Britain, leaving the island defenseless. The Scots, Picts and Irish plundered the island, destroying the cities and laying waste to the land and its peoples. There was a short respite from attacks for a time, and prosperity and luxury returned. But this was not to last. When attacks resumed, especially in the North, the ‘members of the council, together with the proud tyrant’¹¹ invited the Saxons to come to Britain and fight against the enemies. But the Saxons liked the country, and decided to take it for themselves. They devastated the land, until a Romano-Briton named Ambrosius Aurelianus led the survivors into war, winning their first battle against the invaders. Eventually, the Saxons were defeated at Badon Hill and peace returned to Britain for a time. But by Gildas’ day, civil wars wracked the land and the cities had been abandoned.¹²

The *Historia Brittonum*, written some 290 years or so after *De Excidio Britonum*, suddenly possesses far more detail than Gildas provided us. It also covers the 7th century, particularly those events in the north of Britain, of which Gildas would have naturally been unaware.

In its coverage of the 5th century, the *Historia Brittonum* begins with the British living in fear after the departure of the Romans, and how they were ruled over by Vortigern, who lived in

⁹ M. Winterbottom (ed. and trans.), *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents. Arthurian Period Sources vol. 7* (Chichester, 1978), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21-28.

fear himself, not only of the Picts and Irish, but also of a possible Roman invasion, and in fear of Ambrosius. Three keels bearing Hengest and Horsa and their men, driven in exile from Germany, arrive in Britain. Vortigern welcomes them, giving them the island of Thanet in the Thames as their home.¹³

Comparisons with Gildas inevitably arise. There is a good possibility that Vortigern (the English spelling of the Welsh name Gwrtheyrn) may be the ‘proud tyrant’ mentioned in chapter 23.1 of *De Excidio Britonum*. D.N. Dumville makes the argument that the earliest manuscript we have quoting *De Excidio*, a ninth century one from Brittany which quotes extensively from Book II, actually mentions the name *Uortigerno* in connection with the ‘proud tyrant’, and *Uortigerno* would have been an acceptable 6th century form of the name Vortigern.¹⁴

One of the possible sources for this part of the *Historia Brittonum* may have been Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written in 731.¹⁵ This may be the first mention of Hengest and Horsa, the Anglian (i.e. Saxon) leaders who were invited by Vortigern to settle in Britain in return for aiding him in his battles against the Picts and Irish. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, based on Bede and other sources which could at least date back as far as the 7th century,¹⁶ have minimal material on Hengest and Horsa, only saying that they were invited by Vortigern in 449 and then fought against him in 455, when Horsa was killed. Hengest and Æsc continue fighting the British through 465.¹⁷

But the *Historia Brittonum* has a long account of the affairs of Vortigern and Hengest and Horsa, with far more detail than can be found in our existing sources. Hengest brings a lovely maiden to Vortigern, who falls madly in love with her, giving the Saxons leverage against the King. Vortigern’s son Vortimer fights against the Saxons, driving them out at one point, only to die, leaving a power vacuum that the Saxons returned and filled, and finally, Hengest hatches a plot to meet with Vortigern and all the British nobility at a banquet where the Saxons turned against them and killed them all (using daggers hidden in their shoes), except for the King whom they held for ransom until he ceded Essex to them (and possibly Sussex as well).¹⁸

¹³ J. Morris, 24.

¹⁴ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend’, *History* n.s. 62 (1977), 183-4.

¹⁵ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (London, J.M. Dent, 1910), Book 1, Chapter XV.

¹⁶ M. Swanton (ed. and trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (London, Phoenix Press, 2000), xviii-xix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ J. Morris, 28-32.

All of this detail may have come from an English source available to the creator of the *Historia Brittonum*. And the story has a certain saga-like feel to it. D.N. Dumville felt strongly that it was ‘not the sort of stuff of which history is made, but is instead saga-material of the sort plentifully attested for England’.¹⁹

In chapters 32-35 of the *Historia Brittonum* there is an account of St. Germanus and a ‘wicked king called Benlli, a great tyrant,’²⁰ who ruled in Powys. St. Germanus tries to get an audience with the king but is left waiting, for the king would not see him. The servant sent to the saint with the king’s reply takes the saint and his men to his own home where he cooks a calf for them, which the saint brings back to life in the morning. In time, this servant is warned not to stay in the city overnight, and the city is destroyed by fire from heaven. St. Germanus tells the servant, one Cadell, that he would now be king henceforth.

This is hardly history as we know it now. The patron saint of Powys, St. Garmon, was the basis of the legitimacy of the local dynasty there in the 9th century. If D.N. Dumville’s ideas are correct, that the author of the *Historia Brittonum* conflated St. Garmon with St. Germanus (whom Bede had stated was in Britain about that time), then this passage could be seen as a foundation legend which would have been commonly known in the 9th century when the *Historia Brittonum* was written.²¹

Another part of the history of the 5th century covered in the *Historia Brittonum* is the account of the boy, Ambrosius, and the fortress at Dinas Emrys. Vortigern wanted to build a fortress on top of a great hill, but the foundations kept collapsing. His wizards told him that only the sacrifice of a boy born without a father could prevent more trouble. A suitable boy was found, but before he could be killed, he confounded the wizards by discovering the trouble with the hill. Two dragons, one representing the British and one the English, were constantly fighting under the ground, so no fortress could be built. Vortigern gave the hill to the boy, Ambrosius, and moved up north to *Caer Gwrthyrn*.²²

This sounds like folklore, and not history at all. Of all the events of the 5th century depicted up to this point in the *Historia Brittonum*, the only part that might be actual history is

¹⁹ D.N. Dumville, ‘The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*’, *Arthurian Literature* 6 (1986), pp.1-26, 13.

²⁰ J. Morris, 26-8.

²¹ D.N. Dumville, ‘The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*’, 12.

²² J. Morris, 29-31.

the possible existence of Vortigern as a king of the British (and the ‘proud tyrant’ of Gildas). Everything else covered so far in this paper reads like saga, foundation legend or folklore.

The northern section of the *Historia Brittonum*, chapters 57 through 66, and roughly covering the 6th and 7th centuries, attempts to cover the history of the Saxon conquest of northern Britain up to the lands of the Picts in what is now Scotland. The establishment of the Saxon kingdoms of Bernicia, Mercia and Deira and the genealogies of their rulers, plus those of the Saxon kingdom of Kent, are chronicled. In addition, mention is made of the resistance to the Saxons by the British kingdom of Manaw Gododdin (near modern Edinburgh in Scotland) and the establishment of the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd 146 years prior to the reign of Maelgwn the Great.²³

The Saxon genealogies must have come from Saxon king lists. The kingdom of Bernicia in what is now Northumbria was founded by Ida in 549, according to Anglian records, and the *Historia Brittonum* probably uses these lists as a framework for the chronology of the time.²⁴ But the oldest surviving vernacular Anglo-Saxon text we have is an 8th century list of Northumbrian kings that only gives us their names and the number of years that they reigned. There is no evidence in that document of any actual dates in the *Anno Domini* style.²⁵

Another entry in the northern section of the *Historia Brittonum* mentions the migration from the north of Britain to Wales:

King Maelgwn the Great was reigning among British, in Gwynedd, for his ancestors (*quia atavus illius*)²⁶, Cunedda, and his sons, to the number of eight, had come from the north, from the country called Manaw Gododdin, 146 years before Maelgwn reigned, and expelled the Irish from these countries, with immense slaughter, so that they never again returned to inhabit them.²⁷

The *Annales Cambriae* puts the death of Maelgwn at 547 CE during a great plague.²⁸ This would put the migration of Cunedda at sometime before 398, when the Romans were still

²³ J. Morris, 36-9.

²⁴ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain’, 189.

²⁵ M. Swanton, xiv.

²⁶ J. Morris, 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

present in much of Britain, and just ten years after the death of Maximus. Also, according to Dumville,²⁹ the Latin word used for ‘ancestor’ in the above passage, *atavus*, actually means the fifth ancestor, or great-great-great grandfather, and not just some generic term for ancestor. However, in the mid-tenth century, the genealogies were restructured to make Cunedda the third ancestor of Maelgwn instead of the fifth, making the migration of Cunedda around 450 during the reign of Vortigern. This may have been done due to a closer reading of *De Excidio Britonum* under the influence of Bede’s *History*.³⁰ But it needs to be said that this migration, which should have happened before the time of Gildas, is not mentioned anywhere in *De Excidio Britonum*.

In any case, it has been argued that this section of the *History Brittonum* is actually a foundation legend. Celtic genealogies existed to express legal and political claims, not history. While they may be correct, historically, they also might not be, especially should they conflict with the legal claims made by the owner of the genealogy.³¹ As such, the early genealogies may be suspect. Maximus, the Roman tyrant who denuded Britain of her legions, may have been seen as the first truly British emperor, and since he also had a starring role in Gildas’ *De Excidio*, the foundation of medieval Welsh historical scholarship, he could easily have been seen as the one from whom legitimate power would flow. By the 9th century, the pedigrees of many of the ruling houses of Wales were said to descend from him directly, through the male line, or indirectly, by the progenitor of the male line marrying an invented daughter of Maximus. This applies to the dynasties of Powys and Dyfed and to the Second Dynasty of Gwynedd.³²

The arrival of Cunedda in Wales from the north, with his 8 sons, founding many dynasties of north and west Wales, would provide legitimacy to all the 9th century kingdoms involved, especially the Second Dynasty of Gwynedd. Around 800, Gwriad, descended from the men of the north, married Epyllt, descended from Maelgwn Fawr, and their son, Merfyn, became king of Gwynedd in 825 when Epyllt’s uncle died.³³ Not only would Gwynedd descend from Maximus, but also from Cunedda, giving them double legitimacy.

It is interesting to note that Vortigern was considered a ‘founder’ of the dynasty in Powys, and so they kept his legend alive. Once the kingdom collapsed in the mid 9th century,

²⁹ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain’, 182.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

³¹ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain’, 176.

³² *Ibid.*, 180-81, and see note 33 on page 181.

³³ J. Davis, *A History of Wales* (London, Penguin Press, 1993), 81.

however, the literature of Wales quickly forgot Vortigern,³⁴ vilified as the one who had brought the Saxons to Britain, though the English kept his memory alive as the main antagonist in their saga of Hengest and Horsa.³⁵

Synthetic, Synchronistic History

Synthetic history, according to Dumville,³⁶ is when scholars take a bunch of different and often very contradictory sources and then attempt to turn them into a coherent, smooth and ‘official’ version of history. Synchronistic history is when there is an attempt to establish a chronological relationship between the histories of separate peoples.³⁷ These are only rarely done with complete success. Early on in the process, various schools of thought would have their own versions of parts of the ‘history’, and no stories or genealogies could be included unless they fit into the perceived time-line, with the result that early efforts could have had their chronologies confused. In time, there is evidence that these schools could eventually harmonize everything, creating a synthetic or pseudo-history.

This process has been well documented in Ireland, where they have a larger corpus to work with. The earliest example of the ‘history’ of Ireland is the account given in the *Historia Brittonum*³⁸ where the author lists a number of settlements in Ireland coming from Spain. There is also a second section relating to the origins of the Irish peoples themselves, which the *Historia Brittonum* claims came from “what the Irish scholars have told me.”³⁹ These two sections on Irish history are treated separately.

In 9th century Ireland, these two stories were expanded upon by the tale *Scél Tuáin meic Chairill* (“The Story of Tuán son of Cairell”) and a poem by Mael Muru Othna (died 887) called “Can a mbunadas na nGaedel”. The tale includes information missing in the first part of the Irish section in the *Historia Brittonum*, and the poem goes into much greater detail when covering the *Historia Brittonum*’s section on the origins of the Irish peoples, giving the Fir Bolg and the Tuatha De Danann, left out of the account in the *Historia Brittonum*, a place in the

³⁴ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain’, 183.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁶ D.N. Dumville, ‘The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*’, 5-6.

³⁷ T. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Arthur of History’ in R. Bromwich, et al (ed.), *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1991), 20.

³⁸ J. Carey, *A New Introduction to ‘Lebor Gabála Éirenn’* (London, Irish Texts Society, 1993)

³⁹ J. Morris, 21.

story.⁴⁰ These works, and the poems of four men of the tenth and eleventh centuries (Eochaid ua Flainn, Flann Mainistrech mac Echthigirn, Tanaide and Gilla Coemáin mac Gilla Shamthainne) provided the framework for the great Irish account of the origins of Ireland and of the Gaels, the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (the ‘Book of the Taking of Ireland’, also known as the ‘Book of Invasions’), compiled, with a prose framework, by an unknown Irish scholar late in the eleventh century.⁴¹ Then, in the 17th century, a Franciscan scribe and historian named Mícheál Ó Cléirigh reworked the book, as well as did his contemporary Geoffrey Keating in his *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*. For centuries, these two later texts were the main versions that people were aware of.⁴² In Ireland, at least, we can clearly see the process of the ‘tradition of historical fabrication or “pseudo-history”’.⁴³

What could be the reasons for the creation of synthetic, synchronistic history? The needs of the ruling powers would have been very important to the bards, scribes and clerics who collected and wrote these works. Genealogies were needed to justify the rights of those sitting on the local thrones to those thrones. The legends of the saints could be used to justify the ownership of the lands their churches sat on. And in the case of the *Historia Brittonum*, the motives of the author may have been to encourage Britons to come to terms with defeat and the loss of much of Britain to the Saxons, for as Thomas Charles-Edwards put it so well:⁴⁴

The victories of a Gwrthefr, or an Arthur, might be glorious, but had no future; the triumphs of a Patrick and of a Rhun ab Urien would bring whole peoples to salvation.

From all of this, it’s fair to say that the *Historia Brittonum* is far more than just a ‘heap’ of sources lumped together, but rather a very consciously organized attempt at creating a history of the British peoples, possibly the first attempt of its kind in Wales.

But What of Arthur?

⁴⁰ R.A.S. Macalister (Editor and Translator), *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland Part IV* (London, Irish Texts Society, 1941, reprinted 1987), 7 and 107.

⁴¹ J. Carey, 1-5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁴ T. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Arthur of History’, 20.

Most of the poems and the triads that mention Arthur cannot be securely dated to the time of Arthur in the 6th century, but may have been written as late as the end of the 11th century. This makes it very difficult to use any of these poems as witnesses to the period in question.⁴⁵

One poem in particular, *Y Gododdin* by Aneirin, has been pointed out as a proof that Arthur had existed (or at least his tradition had existed) in the 6th century. This poem is a collection of heroic death songs from a battle which was probably fought at Catraeth (Catterick) in the northern end of the Vale of York. This poem is found in a manuscript written in the 13th century (the *Book of Aneirin*) which is incomplete due to mutilation in the Middle Ages.⁴⁶ Scholars believe that this manuscript contains three different portions of the poem written at three different times. One part is written in the hand of the first scribe using 13th century orthography, and the other two parts are written in the hand of a second scribe, with the first part using a ‘more conservative and erratic form of Middle Welsh spelling’⁴⁷, but with the second part written in the Old Welsh spellings that he copied. The brief mention of Arthur, interestingly enough, is only found in this last, and possibly oldest, recension of the text.⁴⁸

More than three hundred of the finest were slain.
 He struck down at both the middle and the extremities.
 The most generous man was splendid before the host.
 From the herd, he used to distribute horses in winter.
 [Gorddur] used to bring black crows down in front of the wall
 of the fortified town – though he was no Arthur –
 amongst men mighty in feats
 in front of the barrier of alder wood – Gorddur.

Suggestive as this section of the poem may be, it cannot be taken as definitive proof of the existence of Arthur in the 5th century. The poem cannot be securely dated any earlier than the 9th century (though it could be older) and there is no proof that the Arthurian reference is not a later interpolation. Thomas Jones argued that this entry had to prove the existence of a historical

⁴⁵ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain’, 176.

⁴⁶ J. Koch (ed.), ‘117. Y Gododdin, The Gododdin Elegies’ in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales* (Oakville, CT and Aberystwyth, Celtic Studies Publications, 2000), 304.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

Arthur because ‘there are no references in early Welsh heroic poetry to legendary or unhistorical figures.’⁴⁹ However, there are two reasons why this may not be a valid point for assuming the existence of a historical Arthur. First, many of the people mentioned in *Y Gododdin* exist only here and with no other reference in any other work, so there is no way of telling if they were ever real or not. And the other reason is that Arthur doesn’t actually *appear* in the poem, he is only referred to in it.⁵⁰

The legends mentioning Arthur recorded in the ‘Wonders of Britain’ section of the *Historia Brittonum*, mentioned previously above, come from a place of magic and wonder, far from the dry stuff of history. Here, graves can change size and the footprints of hounds can impress themselves into solid stone.⁵¹ And many of the places associated with Arthur are ancient monuments. In 1113 some canons from Lyon toured Devon and Cornwall, and were taken to see Arthur’s ‘seat’ and ‘oven’. The ‘seat’s location isn’t known, but the ‘oven’ may have been an ancient tin-smelting furnace later referred to as the ‘king’s oven’ in 1240.⁵² There are many mountains named as ‘Arthur’s seat’ or ‘chair’, and one in Wales, Pen y Fan in the Brecon Beacons, was recorded in 1190⁵³, and may have been known as such before that. This idea of mountains as Arthur’s ‘seats’ reinforces the folkloric idea that, among his other attributes, Arthur was a giant.⁵⁴ O.J. Padel argues that since these folkloric ideas remain constant over the period from 829-30 to at least 1754, unaffected by changes and influences from literary Arthurian cycles, that this ‘is a further reason for regarding the folklore Arthur of the *Historia Brittonum* as the true one, and the “historical” Arthur as the secondary development.’⁵⁵

Arthur’s Battles

In the section on Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum*, there is a list of 12 battles given which are attributed to him. Most of them are not recorded anywhere else, and we can’t say for certain

⁴⁹ T. Jones, ‘Datblydiadau Cynnar Chwedl Arthur’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 17 (1958), pp. 235-52. Translated by Gerald Morgan as ‘The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 8 (1964), pp. 3-21, 13.

⁵⁰ O.J. Padel, ‘The Nature of Arthur’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 1-31, 14.

⁵¹ J. Morris, 42.

⁵² O.J. Padel, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

where they may have been, or even if they ever occurred. The *Annales Cambriae*, or the Welsh Annals, only mention two battles, that of Badon in 516, and the Battle of Camlann in 537⁵⁶. This final battle was made famous in later centuries by Geoffrey of Monmouth as the battle where Arthur was said to have been mortally wounded and carried off to Avalon, where he waits sleeping, ready to return to aid the British. Camlann is not even mentioned in the *Historia Brittonum*, nor indeed, by Gildas in his *De Excidio Britonum*. The location of the Battle of Badon is unknown, but if Arthur really did fight against Hengest, who was located in Kent, then it may have been somewhere in the south of Britain.

Three other battles *may* be identifiable, based on other sources. The eleventh battle takes place ‘on the hill called Agned’⁵⁷. Some versions of the Latin text use the name *Breguoin* (with variant spellings). This name could be equated with *kat gellawr brewyn* (the battle of the huts of Brewyn)⁵⁸ which is a victory by Urien of Rheged, according to one of Taliesin’s poems (*Arise, Reget, glory of kings!*).⁵⁹ Urien fought against the Bernician kings so he would have been in the north of the country.⁶⁰ The ninth battle, that of the ‘city of the Legion’,⁶¹ might refer to a battle mentioned by Bede which took place in Chester in 613, and the seventh battle, that of ‘Celyddon Forest, that is, the Battle of *Celyddon Coed*’,⁶² is probably the same as the battle of Arfderydd, which would have taken place somewhere in the south of Scotland.⁶³ For Arthur to have fought all these battles would have had him ranging all over Britain, something that may have been impossible due to the terribly difficult conditions at that time.

Where else could this list of battles have come from? It has been suggested that this list may have come from a Welsh poem listing a number of battles attributed to Arthur, but which may not have been fought by him. There are many examples of early Welsh poems of this kind, ‘and the earliest is a short list of battles in the poem to Cynan Garwyn fab Brochfael Ysgithrog of Powys, whose son Selyf ap Cynan was killed in the battle of Chester in 613.’⁶⁴ This idea has been generally accepted by most scholars.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ J. Morris, 45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁸ O.J. Padel, 18.

⁵⁹ J. Koch, 346, line 22.

⁶⁰ J. Koch, 342, note 21 and J. Morris, 38.

⁶¹ J. Morris, 35.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶³ T. Jones, 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁵ D.N. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend’, 188.

Gildas, Arthur and the Battle of Badon Hill

Finally, what can we learn about Arthur from *De Excidio Britonum*? In the section dealing with the Saxon invasions of Britain we find there is *no mention* of Arthur at all. Chapter 25.1 tells us that many of the people were butchered by the invaders, or surrendered to them and become slaves, or fled across the sea. Others hid in the mountains and hills, waiting for the Saxons to leave, which eventually they did. Then the survivors gathered together so that:

they should not altogether be destroyed. Their leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it.⁶⁶

Ambrosius led the people in battle, and God granted them victory over the Saxons. There the paragraph seems to end, and the next one begins with:

From then on victory went now to our countrymen, now to their enemies (*Ex eo tempore nunc cives, nunc hostes, vincebant*⁶⁷): so that in this people the Lord could make trial (as he tends to) of his latter day Israel to see whether it loves him or not. This lasted right up to the year of the siege of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed.⁶⁸

Attempts have been made by scholars over the years to account for Gildas' omission of Arthur's name. One idea was that Arthur was so well known that Gildas may have felt no need to have to name him. The text at this point in the narrative, however, is trying to give a historical outline for people to admire and emulate.⁶⁹ But these arguments may be totally unnecessary, since it's possible that Gildas does, in fact, name the victor at Badon Hill.

⁶⁶ M. Winterbottom (ed. and trans.), *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*, 28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁹ O.J. Padel, 16.

The paragraph division mentioned above is what appears in all modern texts of *De Excidio Britonum*. But the earliest copy of this that we have is the 10th century manuscript in the British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.vi, and all others are copies of the late 12th century or later. Oliver Padel mentions that the initial letter ‘e’ at the beginning of the phrase, “*Ex eo tempore nunc cives*” in the passage above, has nothing special about it to make it stand out as the beginning of a new paragraph, and looks like many other initial letter ‘e’s’ elsewhere in the text, not just those at the beginning of sentences. Padel points out:

...in contrast, there are large initial **E**s elsewhere in the text....If the paragraph break is removed, and the whole passage taken as one, then Mount Baden reads naturally as the victory which crowned the career of Ambrosius Aurelianus himself.⁷⁰

At this time, it is really not possible to say that anything we surmise about Arthur and the 6th century is a settled argument. Future advances in textual research may reveal more that we do not yet know, changing the ways in which we understand the place in history, real or imagined, of this great warrior. But as things stand now, the evidence just isn’t there to point towards the existence of a historical man named Arthur, and rather, the evidence argues against it. There is a very strong possibility that Arthur was a mythological figure that, through the processes of synthetic and synchronistic history and the needs of a defeated people to have a shining and successful savior, became accepted as a historical one by the 9th century and the writing of the *Historia Brittonum*.

⁷⁰ O.J. Padel, 17.

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