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The early Arthur: history and myth

For anybody concerned with the origins of the Arthurian legend, one literary work should represent the point of embarkation: the *Historia Brittonum* or *History of the British*. It is both the earliest clearly dated text to refer to Arthur, and the one upon which most efforts to locate and identify a historical figure behind the name have been based. From it, three different routes of enquiry proceed, which may be characterised as the textual, the folkloric and the archaeological, and each of these will now be followed in turn.

The Arthur of literature

Any pursuit of Arthur through written texts needs to begin with the *Historia* itself; and thanks primarily to the researches of David Dumville and Nicholas Higham, we now know more or less exactly when and why it was produced in its present form. It was completed in Gwynedd, the north-western kingdom of Wales, at the behest of its monarch, Merfyn, during the year 830. Merfyn was no ordinary Welsh ruler of the age, but an able and ruthless newcomer, an adventurer who had just planted himself and his dynasty on the throne of Gwynedd, and had ambitions to lead all the Welsh. As such, he sponsored something that nobody had apparently written before: a complete history of the Welsh people. To suit Merfyn's ambitions for them, and for himself, it represented the Welsh as the natural and rightful owners of all Britain: pious, warlike and gallant folk who had lost control of most of their land to the invading English, because of a mixture of treachery and overwhelming numbers on the part of the invaders. The identity of the author will never be known. There was a later tradition, not recorded before the 1160s, that he was a writer of approximately the right period called Nemnius or Nennius. So he might have been, but no firm evidence survives for this.¹ Whoever he was, he probably came from south-east Wales rather than Gwynedd itself, because of his apparent extensive familiarity with that region. He was also an excellent choice for the job, crafting together a

brief and exciting narrative, from a relatively restricted range of materials, which portrayed the Welsh and English exactly as described above, and gave Gwynedd a moral primacy among the Welsh kingdoms.

What has become the most famous section of the entire book follows, without any break, from a description of the growth of numbers of the English in Britain and the succession of a new Anglo-Saxon king of Kent.² It opens with the sentence ‘Then Arthur fought against them in those days, together with the kings of the British; but he was leader in the battles’ (*sed ipse dux erat bellorum*). It then lists twelve battles that he fought, four of them along the same river, the Dubglas or Blackwater. Two of them get special mention: one was at the Guinnion fortress, where he ‘carried the image of the holy Mary, the everlasting Virgin, on his shoulders, and the heathen were put to flight on that day, and there was a great slaughter upon them, through the power of the holy Virgin Mary, his mother’. The other was at Mount Badon, or Badon Hill, ‘and in it nine hundred and sixty men fell in one day, from a single attack of Arthur’s, and no one laid them low save he alone’. The list ends with the comment that ‘he was victorious in all his campaigns’. It then resumes its account of the subsequent doings of the English, ‘when they were defeated in all their campaigns’, in bringing over massive reinforcements from their German homeland to resume their offensive against the native British.

There is no good evidence at all of what source or sources were used for this passage, and responses to the problem have ranged from confident assertions that it was based on a Welsh poem to Nicholas Higham’s hypothesis that the whole thing was concocted by the author of the *Historia* himself.³ Certainly the latter hinted at a known tradition behind it, because he gave the name of one of Arthur’s victories, Celidon Wood, in both a Latin and a Welsh version: *silve Celidonis, id est [that is] Cat Coit Celidon*. The implication is that the Welsh name would already be celebrated. It is, indeed, the only battle that we can still locate on a map with any confidence, being the usual medieval Welsh name for the large forest covering much of what became southern Scotland. The sites of all the rest remain a matter for conjecture, so that they could all fall within the bounds of one compact region, or be scattered across Britain. It has long been pointed out that Celidon Wood seems a strange place in which to have been fighting any sort of English, let alone those of Kent, whom neither history nor archaeology has depicted as having got that far north that early. This could mean that the author of the *Historia* was pressing battles that had never involved the English into a piece of propaganda against the latter; but our knowledge of events in this period is so slight that the English might indeed have got anywhere. Nor has there been any more agreement as to what was so significant

about Arthur being *dux bellorum*, ‘leader in the battles’; it could mean that he was a paramount king, or that he wasn’t a king at all, or that he had assumed a former Roman military office, or that he was being likened to the Biblical prophet Joshua (who in the Latin Bible was given the same title), or even that he was being invented in Joshua’s image.

The *Historia Brittonum* has, however, more to say about Arthur elsewhere than in this constantly quoted list of battles. This other material occurs near the end of the book, in a section on ‘the wonders of Britain’ (Chs. 67–74). Most of these are located in south-east Wales, which is why the author is often thought to have come from there. One was in the district of Buellt (modern Builth), and was a cairn of stones with an animal’s footprint on top on one near the summit. This was said to have been left by Arthur’s dog, Cabal, when Arthur hunted ‘the pig Troynt’. Another ‘wonder’ consisted of a mound in the Eryng district, which could not be measured because it seemed to keep changing size. It had been raised over the grave of Amr, or Anir, ‘son of the warrior Arthur’, who was killed by Arthur himself.

There is, or should be, much in the *Historia* to depress anybody in pursuit of a ‘real’ Arthur. For one thing, it is now clear that we know much less about post-Roman Britain than its author thought that he did. The narrative that he provided has long been rejected as thoroughly unsound, and there is effectively no political and military history of Britain between 407 and 595. Whatever experts in cultural, social, economic and religious affairs may feel, to those interested in specific rulers and their actions, this period is still very much ‘the Dark Ages’. It is also very clear that, by the time that the *Historia* was written, Arthur was already long established as a figure of major importance in Welsh memory, credited with actions in settings all the way from mid-Wales to the waist of Scotland. Virtually the whole of this great trove of tradition, extant in the 820s, has been completely lost to us. No other source mentions most of the battles credited to Arthur, or the unfortunate Amr or Anir and the reason for his death. The ‘pig Troynt’ has probably left a presence in later literature, for it is almost certainly the terrifying wild boar, the Twrch Trwyth, which Arthur and his warband hunt in one of the main episodes of a famous Arthurian story, incorporated during the nineteenth century into the collection of medieval Welsh narratives dubbed by its editor *The Mabinogion*. This is *Mal y Kavas Culhwch Olwen* (*Culhwch and Olwen*), the tale of Prince Culhwch’s wooing of Olwen, and a comparison between it and the *Historia* actually accentuates our problem.

The story of Culhwch and Olwen has traditionally been regarded as the oldest surviving one to feature Arthur, and shows him as already the supreme warlord of all Britain, with a retinue of heroes ready to go on quests and to take on superhuman foes and magicians. It used to be thought that it

dated back to the tenth century in its present form; now Rachel Bromwich and Simon Evans have demonstrated that it was written round about 1100, and that details were probably added to it even later. In that sense, it hardly belongs to the world of the 'early Arthur' at all. Kenneth Jackson had already shown how many themes and motifs had been built into it from tales that had been circulating across the Old World for hundreds of years before. It is therefore a sophisticated and elaborate work from the world of high medieval Welsh letters, and this makes it all the more significant that the boar hunt in it is not exactly the same as that (probably) commemorated three centuries before at the cairn in Buellt. Arthur does indeed have a hound here called Cafal, or Cavall, who takes part in the hunt, but as a peripheral character, overshadowed in the story even by other dogs, and certainly not given the prominence warranted by the account of the footprint.

From the *Historia*, the textual trail leads both backwards and forward; but the backward route, alas, does not take us to Arthur, but to the origins of the need for a Welsh history of the sort that the *Historia* represented. These begin with the nearest thing that we possess to an account of the sub-Roman period in Britain written by somebody who was part of it: the work of Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*. The people of the high Middle Ages believed that they had a complete and reliable biography of this man: we are now not sure who he was, when he was or where he was. He could have written at any point in the period 490–560, at most places in Britain or Brittany, and might have been a cleric or an educated layman. His purpose was to castigate the native British of his time in general, and a specific set of their kings in particular (all in Wales or south-western Britain) for their sins. In the process he did provide something like an account of British history since the end of Roman rule, but it was sketchy, selective and vague. It was intended to accuse the Britons of being both morally bad and unwarlike, and their defeats by the English as a just punishment by God. He did try to make clear that God had given them a fighting chance, by producing some military heroes and enabling them to defeat the invaders in turn; his point was that they had wasted that chance. The single native British victory that he named was at Mount Badon, which the *Historia* was to credit to Arthur. Gildas, however, never specified who had commanded there, and the only native British general whom he named and extolled was one Aurelius Ambrosius, a man of noble Roman descent. His point here was that his compatriots had needed a Roman to achieve even such success as they had managed. He never mentioned Arthur, even though he seemed to be living at just the right time to do so. This could have been because Gildas disliked him personally, or because his achievements ran counter to the whole argument of the book, or because they were set in a region in which Gildas

was not interested. Alternatively, the silence could be because Arthur never existed, or had flourished at a quite different time, or was much less important than later tradition made him out to be.

Next in the textual sequence after Gildas is Bede, the great historian of the early English, writing in the 730s. His purpose was to make out his own people, the English, to be the chosen people of God and the true heirs of the Romans. To justify that view, the native British had to be like the Biblical Canaanites: the low life that got swept aside in the proper implementation of God's plan for Britain. Gildas was an absolute gift to Bede, because he was a native Briton who called his own people a sinful bunch of losers who had deserved all they had suffered at English hands. Bede's history didn't mention Arthur either, but it would hardly have done so, even had he been the great commander portrayed by the *Historia Brittonum*, for two different reasons. One is that until about the year 600 the English had been almost completely illiterate. Almost all that Bede knew about them before then depended on oral tradition, and the kind of oral tradition that tribal peoples preserve tends to consist of epic poetry and song celebrating their own achievements. They are unlikely to have celebrated being trashed by Arthur. The other possible reason why Arthur does not appear in Bede's history is that to do so, as a very successful native British soldier, would have wrecked the entire argument of the book. The same considerations make it even less remarkable that English sources written up after Bede's time, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, do not mention Arthur either.

What is crystal clear is that the *Historia Brittonum*, composed to counteract the effects of both Gildas and Bede and to give the Welsh a heroic self-image as rightful owners of Britain, had a use for Arthur that neither of the earlier two writers had possessed. It is, in fact, the first known work of history to have done so, which is why it should be no surprise that Arthur first features in it. What cannot be deduced from the *Historia* itself is whether there was a 'real' Arthur, and, if there was, how much resemblance he bore to the figure represented in the text; nor are there any other literary works that do anything effective to resolve this problem. In the textual trail that leads forward from the *Historia*, there is only one work, in fact, which contributes anything even very likely to be useful to the matter. This consists of the *Annales Cambriae*, or Welsh Annals, a chronicle apparently put together in south-west Wales during the 950s.⁴ It matters because it represents the first attempt to locate Arthur in exact time. For the period before 613 the author had no systematic sequence of native British occurrences. What he did have was an Irish chronicle, now lost, which either already included a total of eleven events set in Britain, or into which he inserted these events. All that have an identifiable location are set in north Wales or

further north in Britain, and this northern bias is also apparent in later parts of the chronicle.

Two entries which cannot be located on the map concern Arthur. The earliest is in 516 (or 518, as we are not absolutely sure when the chronicle's base-line begins): 'The battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders [or shield] for three days and nights and the Britons were victors.' The second is in 537 (or 539): 'The battle of Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut perished, and there was death in England and Ireland.' There is some slight evidence that these entries originally derived from different sources, for that on Badon gives the name of the battle, like the rest of the chronicle, in Latin, while that on Camlann gives it in Welsh. They differ also in that the first is harmonious with the *Historia Brittonum* (which the compiler of the chronicle had certainly read), and indeed Nicholas Higham has called it simply a conflation of two of the *Historia's* battles. The latter is not so harmonious, because it describes a battle not found in the *Historia*, and calls into question the latter's claim that Arthur was victorious in all his campaigns; even if he fell at Camlann while his cause triumphed, this is a qualified success. Nor does the entry give any indication of the relationship between Arthur and Medraut, nor the connection of the battle, if any, with the rest of the annal; 'death' is commonly interpreted as 'plague', but it may mean some other source of mortality.

There is no other literary material that can be universally recognised as at least a reasonably good source for what people thought and said about Arthur before the great watershed of the twelfth century, in which he becomes, or is revealed as, a literary figure of truly international stature. The *Historia* did not, after all, succeed in establishing him immediately as a universally accepted hero amongst the Welsh. The poem *Armes Prydein* had very similar objectives, in calling on Wales to remember its pride as a nation and to resist the English. It can be dated with reasonable confidence to a period just over a century after the *Historia*; and it never mentions Arthur. Some of the lives of Welsh saints – those of Gildas, Cadoc, Carannog and Padarn – give him a prominent role, and have often in the past been taken as evidence for his historical identity. None, however, can be said with certainty to have been written before the twelfth century; it is the same problem as that encountered with the tale of Culhwch and Olwen. There is the enigmatic poem known in modern times as *Preiddeu Annwn*, *The Spoils of the Underworld* (or *Otherworld*). It apparently describes a disastrous expedition led by Arthur into a supernatural realm, and might well be tenth century; but might equally be 200 years later.

An especially large quantity of ink has been spilled, and continues to flow, over the poem known as the *Gododdin*, one of the classics of early Welsh literature. It purports to describe the almost complete destruction of a band of heroes who set out from what is now south-eastern Scotland to do battle at a place called Catraeth. The period concerned is apparently the late sixth century, a generation or two after the time associated with Arthur in the *Historia* and the *Annales*. One of the warriors concerned, Guaurthur, is compared to Arthur. Now, if the text was put into its present form soon after the actual battle, this is good evidence for Arthur's historical existence, even if it tells us little about him. John Koch has indeed recently published fresh arguments that a sixth- to seventh-century text can be reconstructed from the poem. Even without the major consideration that these have immediately been challenged by other scholars, Koch himself acknowledges that passages were added to the contents in later periods. The latter may extend all the way to the thirteenth century, and the reference to Arthur could well be one of them. What seemed once to be a promising line of enquiry for those primarily concerned with him has therefore got nowhere.

If progressive textual analysis has not been kind to those who had hoped for a better sense of whom the 'original' Arthur might have been, the mood of post-modern literary criticism is no more nurturing. One of the current experts in early Welsh literature, G. R. Isaac, recently reversed the traditional formula that had been applied to it. This had treated it as the creation of the warrior society of a 'Celtic heroic age'. Isaac pointed out that we have no knowledge of such a society other than that afforded by the literature; as far as we are concerned, the latter has created the age.⁵ The *Historia Brittonum* did not create Arthur, in the literal sense; when it was written there were already a cairn in Buellt and a tumulus in Eryng, at the least, which bore witness to the hero's reputation, and probably much else beside. Nor did it create him as an enduring literary figure: the Arthur of the high medieval stories barely overlaps with the deeds and associations of the one in the *Historia*. It is almost certain that the hero of oral tradition would have blossomed into the familiar legendary king even if the *Historia* had never been written. What it did do was to establish the Arthur who has been commonly regarded, ever since the collapse of belief in the later medieval pseudo-histories of Britain, as the 'real' one. Thus the most important feature of this free-floating text is that, although it is apparently the earliest item in the whole Arthurian corpus, it has come to exert a hold on the modern imagination that many of those from later centuries, embodying the most celebrated episodes of the legend, have lacked.

The Arthur of folklore

In addition to the two Arthurs familiar to scholars, the Dark Age warrior and the king of high medieval romance, there has long existed a third. He is written into the native British landscape, as a figure of superhuman might. The capstones of Neolithic tombs in Wales, weighing many tons each, are described in local tradition as pebbles flicked from his shoe, or quoits tossed by him in a game. A substantial Roman temple in Scotland, long destroyed, was supposed to be his oven, while the mountain that looms over Edinburgh was his chair. During the twentieth century, this Arthur was regarded as subsidiary to the others – an example of the exaggeration that folk memory will give to a great human being – but it was not always so. For much of the nineteenth century, it was argued that the original Arthur was a pagan god, probably of the sun, who was turned into a human hero after the coming of Christianity. According to this view, the character who flicks megaliths across counties was the ‘true’ one, the form from which the others derived. Nineteenth-century scholars were fond of relating traditional heroes to timeless and fundamental forces of nature. Those of the twentieth century, just as strongly affected by a need for imagined reconnection with the past and the land, in an age of rapid change, have preferred to find real people behind the stories. The same contrast has been reflected in attitudes to Robin Hood, Britain’s only other legendary figure to achieve enduring international fame.

Recently the essentially mythic status of Arthur has been reasserted by Oliver Padel.⁶ His point of departure is, of course, the *Historia Brittonum*, but whereas virtually all other modern commentators have concentrated on the list of battles, he has drawn attention to the physical ‘wonders’ associated with Arthur later in the book. In his reading, these represent the original, completely imaginary figure behind the legend, a giant associated with magic and with marvellous animals, who was later turned by some traditions into a quasi-historical warrior. The parallel character in Gaelic tradition is Fionn MacCumhail, who likewise commands a picked band of famous warriors in defence of his land, has a particular foe in the form of foreign invaders (the men of Lochlann instead of the English), and has frequent interactions with enchantments and supernatural beings. In Padel’s view, both Arthur and Fionn are the same mythical being, a land-protecting superman, deployed in different linguistic regions. This hypothesis has recently been restated at considerably greater length, and in much richer detail, by Thomas Green.⁷

The problem with this hypothesis is that it can cut the other way on both sides of the comparison. The human Arthur of the *Historia* could as readily have turned into the mythical one. As for Fionn, the author of the most

recent complete study of his legend to date, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin – on whom both Padel and Green draw – has suggested that behind it lie components of both a historical character, associated particularly with the Laigin people of south-eastern Ireland, and a divine figure symbolising wisdom. Once the two were conflated, the cycle of tales spread out across the whole of the island, drawing in personalities and traditions from other provinces.⁸ It is possible that exactly the same happened to the early Arthurian legend. Proponents of a historical Arthur have at times stretched the evidence by taking as proven the earliest possible date for the sources that appear to represent one; conversely, Thomas Green rests much of his case for a mythological hero on assuming the earliest possible date for texts that seem to display such a figure. The arguments made by him and Oliver Padel are, however, as cogent as those for a genuine military leader, and, even if they are wrong, have served two valuable purposes. One is to draw attention to the complementary relationship between the Arthurian and Fionn cycles, the former occupying just the same symbolic space among peoples speaking Brythonic languages as the latter does in the Gaelic-speaking area. The other is to remind us that the assumption of most modern scholarship, that Arthur is in origin purely a Welsh hero, is not necessarily correct: as soon as appropriate records begin, he is found embedded in the traditions of the Cornish, Bretons and southern Scots as well. It is a salutary reminder that only the better survival of early Welsh sources may have caused his particular association with that people, and also – again – of what a large body of information circulating about Arthur in the early Middle Ages has been lost.

A more exotic use of folklore to suggest possible origins for the legend has been made by some American authors, on and off, ever since the 1970s. It focuses on stories collected in the late nineteenth century among the Ossetians, a people living in a remote part of the Caucasus Mountains. These contain motifs that provide apparent parallels to features of the Arthurian cycle, such as a sword set in the earth as a symbol of sovereignty, a marvellous vessel which can only be claimed by a warrior without any moral stain, and a hero who can only die when his sword is thrown into the sea. A mechanism has been found to explain how these traditions could have been transmitted to Britain, in the form of Sarmatian cavalry from the steppes north of the Caucasus, who were employed by the Romans. Some were certainly stationed in Lancashire during the late second century under an officer called Lucius Artorius Castus, one of a tiny number of Romans to bear the Latin version of Arthur's name.⁹ This theory of Arthurian origins eventually achieved wide popular currency in 2004 by being built into Jerry Bruckheimer's film *King Arthur*, starring Clive Owen. The problem with it is

that none of the parallels lies beyond the possible boundaries of coincidence, or else they could represent different versions of commonly found motifs that had travelled around Eurasia for millennia. As for Castus, he seems to have had nothing remarkable about him except his name, and was duly reposted from Lancashire to Italy: Britain was merely an apparently routine bit of duty in a career that saw service in four different provinces.

More recently a British classicist, Graham Anderson, has located the origins of the legend in archaic Greece. He has found a king of Arcadia called Arktouros, and 104 passages in Greek and Roman literature that appear to refer to characters or episodes from the Arthurian romances. There are also some apparent similarities of names: Gauanes for Gawain, Ganeira for Guinevere, and so on.¹⁰ The same objections, however, occur to this hypothesis as to the Caucasian one, compounded by the fact that Anderson has selected his events and personalities from the whole range of medieval romances, early and late. Had his examples all occurred together in the earliest, then there would have been more mileage to the idea. While respect is due to these 'external' solutions to the problem of Arthur's origins, it still seems as if Britain and Brittany are the best places in which to seek him.

The Arthur of archaeology

For much of the twentieth century, it seemed as if archaeology might succeed in locating a historical Arthur where textual analysis had failed, and for about fifteen intoxicating years – from 1960 to 1975 – many people believed that it was actually doing so. A large part of the traditional appeal of the discipline, since it began to emerge in the late nineteenth century, has been as a quest romance, undertaken to reveal the truth about particular episodes of the human past. Some of the greatest public excitement that it has generated has been when it has appeared to provide evidence to substantiate great traditional stories. Two bodies of these had already been given apparent support by excavation before 1900 – Homer's poems and the Bible – and it was virtually inevitable that the Arthurian romances should eventually get the same treatment. There were three different reasons why they did so in the mid-twentieth century, rather than before or after. One was simply that by then there were many archaeologists available for the work, the result of the full professionalisation of the discipline since the Second World War, and its attachment to university courses. The second was that this supply of personnel was confronted by a problem of funding. Archaeology is hugely more expensive than historical studies, and projects that make a powerful appeal to the popular imagination stand the best chance of raising the necessary money, both from public subscription and from private sponsors. Finally, to

a post-war Britain caught in the process of resigning its imperial and Great Power status, and jettisoning most of the attitudes and ideologies left over from its Victorian apogee, the Arthur of the *Historia Brittonum* seemed to be a traditional hero better fitted than most to adapt to changing needs. He was a warrior who had defended his nation with the courage and success of traditional patriotic leaders, while cutting a less stuffy and conventional figure than most. He could be said to belong equally to all the different peoples of Britain and – clad imaginatively but plausibly in the furs, leathers, long hair, trailing moustaches and jewellery of a Celtic warlord – function both as a national icon and a counter-cultural one, an establishment figure and a noble savage.

Between 1930 and 1975, archaeologists had it both ways at once, with huge short-term success. They dug at post-Roman sites, and in search of the figure from the *Historia*, but chose places that were associated with the later, and more generally familiar, high medieval legends. Raleigh Radford dug in Cornwall at Tintagel, which those legends had made Arthur's birthplace, and Castle Dore, the most probable location of King Mark's palace in the story of Tristan. At both places he claimed to have discovered impressive remains of just the right period. He went on to excavate at Glastonbury Abbey, where the twelfth-century monks had proclaimed their discovery of the grave of Arthur and Guinevere, and declare that he had uncovered a native British monastery beneath the English one. Philip Rahtz found a structure on Glastonbury Tor that might be identified with the fortress of King Melwas, captor of Guinevere in another twelfth-century tale. Most spectacular of all seemed to be the achievement of Leslie Alcock, at the hillfort of South Cadbury, which a Tudor legend had held to be the site of Camelot: after a lavish excavation made possible by the maximum possible publicity, he concluded that he had uncovered a stronghold and palace of the correct time. By the end of the 1960s, the decade which saw the projects at Glastonbury and Cadbury, there was a general belief among scholars and public alike that archaeology had proved the existence of the Arthur of the *Historia* and the *Annales*, and so, by implication, permitted belief in much of the rest of the legend.

By 1975 that belief was already evaporating among experts, and by 1980 it had almost wholly gone. In part this reaction was born of disappointment, for at none of these sites was any solid evidence of Arthur's presence, or that of any of his traditional companions, actually found. In part it was the result of overkill, as more sober analysis revealed no trace of post-Roman occupation at Castle Dore or Glastonbury Abbey, while the remains at Tintagel, on the Tor and at Cadbury could all be interpreted in ways that had no relevance to the medieval romances. In part it was due to jealousy, as

archaeologists working on productive sites without Arthurian associations felt that their labours were being eclipsed, and starved of funding, by the publicity given to places linked to the legend. In part it reflected the waning of 1960s romanticism and idealism, in the harsher, more cynical and more pessimistic cultural climate of the late 1970s.

It also, however, came about because archaeologists of the post-Roman period no longer needed Arthur. They had revealed a rich and exciting culture that was represented equally at sites that had Arthurian associations and sites that had not, and by the 1980s this could be a focus of interest and study in its own right. It is clear now that during what historically are still the Dark Ages the people of western Britain flourished in a way that they had never done under Roman rule; indeed, once the Romans had officially gone, they appropriated and developed the civilisation of their former masters as their own. They made beautiful and sophisticated artefacts, raised impressive stone memorials to their dead, supported a Church based on monasteries and bishops that was both a powerhouse of piety and a repository of sophisticated, Latin, literacy, and regularly attracted traders who sailed all the way from the Levant. In doing so they created a unique and impressive society, which no longer needs the figure of Arthur to invest it with glamour and interest in the eyes of the present.

Back to the crossroads

Much of what has been said above may induce melancholy in readers who remain primarily interested, after the twentieth-century fashion, in a historical Arthur. There are, however, some consolations to be found for them in the place where this set of reflections started, where literary, folkloric and archaeological approaches to the matter meet and diverge. One is simply that nobody has actually disproved the existence of a 'real' character behind the legend: there remains an Arthur-sized hole in recorded British history.

A second derives from the continuing series of excavations at Tintagel, which have increasingly interpreted it as a high-status secular site – in crude terms a royal or princely headquarters – of the fifth and sixth centuries. Nothing has still been found to link it to Arthur, and the fuss created in non-academic circles in 1998 by the finding of an engraved slate provided another object lesson of the way in which such links could be created without proper evidence. The graffito scrawled on the slate included the name 'Artognou', which has little in common with Arthur, but was immediately treated in some parts of the mass media as though somehow it had. What is really significant about the confirmation of Tintagel's importance during

what has been called the Arthurian age is its implications for the power of popular memory. The site was abandoned in the seventh century, and, by the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth, 500 years later, there could have been nothing showing on the ground to indicate its earlier significance. Despite this, he confidently identified it as having played a key part in the story of Arthur. Somehow, tradition had preserved the memory of its former character throughout the intervening half a millennium. This being the case, it is possible that other aspects of the ‘developed’ Arthurian legend of the central Middle Ages may also have been handed down from an early date, although we lack any means of testing this.

Another consolation for those still in pursuit of an historic Arthur may be provided by the archaeologist Ken Dark, in a recent survey of the material remains now known from sub-Roman Britain. It may be recalled that if the *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* point to any part of the island as especially associated with him, it is to what is now northern England and southern Scotland. The actual, self-conscious, attempt by twentieth-century archaeologists to dig up evidence of Arthur’s presence focused instead on sites in the West Country that had later associations with the legend. Now Dark has pieced together a great deal of scattered evidence to conclude that the forts along Hadrian’s Wall were renovated, reoccupied and linked anew to the old Roman legionary base at York at some time around the year 500. He commented that this looks as if somebody was making an attempt to revive the late Roman regional command of an officer called the *Dux Britanniarum*. He added that an apparent lack of minor kings in the area, suggested by the absence of reoccupied hill forts of the sort common in the south, reinforces the sense of a single great leader in charge of the whole region at that period. To this he related Gildas’s comment that the most important of the monarchs whom he was denouncing, Magloconus, was ‘almost’ the greatest ruler in Britain of his time. The hint here is that there was a greater elsewhere in the island, and that person could have been the one who possessed the revived jurisdiction of the *Dux*.¹¹

Ken Dark has therefore identified archaeological evidence for a figure who corresponds very well to the Arthur of the *Historia*, and in doing so found viable solutions to two classic problems of the texts: Gildas’s apparent lack of mention of the hero, and the significance of the *Historia*’s emphasis that he was a *dux* as well as, or instead of, a king. Dark himself, however, never speaks of Arthur in the course of this discussion, and for entirely understandable reasons: as an archaeologist of the present time, he is not interested in the legend, and there is nothing that directly relates it to the data that he is analysing. The implications drawn from his analysis are my

own; and I in turn am not attempting to make a case for the ‘discovery’ of a northern Arthur (by appropriating somebody else’s scholarship). What I am trying to do, rather, is show how, just as an Arthur-sized gap still exists in the history of Britain, so an Arthur-shaped figure can still plausibly be detected in the archaeological record. My own vision of the future is that further discoveries made by excavation can be combined with the textual and folkloric evidence to suggest a number of different possible origins for Arthur. Each of these would be emotionally satisfying, and creatively inspiring, to a different constituency of people interested in a historical figure behind the later medieval legend.

Such an outcome would make a virtue of the obstacles that still stand in the way of any quest for such a figure, and which may otherwise paralyse any conscientious researcher. On the cathedral at Modena in Italy are carvings of Arthur and some of his knights, notably Gawain. That would not matter a lot had the sculptures concerned not been firmly dated between the years 1099 and 1109, before the recorded boom in the production of Arthurian romances that is supposed to have made Arthur and his followers into figures with a pan-European appeal, or at least one common to the whole world of Latin Christianity. In terms of the surviving textual evidence, they shouldn’t be there. As it is, they are a further reminder of how little we know and how much we have lost of the early development of the Arthurian legend; solid witnesses to the existence of a mass of spoken and written tradition about Arthur that already extended across western Europe by the year 1100, and of which virtually nothing remains. Some would conclude from this, with good reason, that any attempt either to locate an original Arthur, or even to trace the growth of the legend up to the twelfth century, must be completely futile. It might be possible to argue instead, with equal humility in the face of the loss of evidence, for a multiplicity of plausible interpretations of the sort suggested above. Such an approach would enable individual researchers to choose whether or not they wish to engage with a Dark Age Arthur, and how they wish to do so, while not presenting a general public, still imaginatively fired by the legend, with a complete interpretative void. Such an approach would, furthermore, take up the challenge posed, right at the beginning of our knowledge, by the author of the *Historia Brittonum*, in presenting posterity with a mighty leader who was at once a credible historical person and a figure of myth. Ever since he appears in the record, Arthur has been more than one kind of being, demanding more than one kind of understanding. In that sense, the ‘early’ Arthur is actually more complex than many of those who have featured in the legend since.

NOTES

- 1 On one side of the debate, see David Dumville, “Nennius” and the “Historia Brittonum”, *Studia Celtica*, 10–11 (1975–6), 78–95; on the other, P. J. C. Field, ‘Nennius and his History’, *Studia Celtica*, 30 (1996), 159–65.
- 2 *Historia Brittonum*, Ch. 56, ed. and trans. John Morris in *British History and the Welsh Annals*, Arthurian Period Sources 8 (Chichester: Phillimore, 1980), p. 76.
- 3 Nicholas Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 46–69.
- 4 John Morris has edited this in the same volume as the *Historia Brittonum*; for the Arthurian entries, see p. 85.
- 5 G. R. Isaac, ‘Gweith Gwen Ystrat and the Northern Heroic Age of the Sixth Century’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 36 (1998), 61–70.
- 6 O. J. Padel, ‘The Nature of Arthur’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), 1–31.
- 7 Thomas Green, *Concepts of Arthur* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007).
- 8 Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988).
- 9 C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, ‘The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 91 (1978), 512–27; L.A. Malcor, ‘Lucius Artorius Castus’, *The Heroic Age*, 1 (1999), 1–11.
- 10 Graham Anderson, *King Arthur in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 11 Ken Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000), pp. 193–202.