

KING ARTHUR IN ANTIQUITY



GRAHAM ANDERSON



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FOR JASPER GRIFFIN

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PREFACE

It is not so long ago that an impassioned scholar of ‘Nennius’ urged his fellow-scholars not to believe in King Arthur, or at the very least to stop using him in the titles of their books. I have no particular beliefs of my own about so elusive a figure, but the significance of the title ‘King Arthur in Antiquity’ will scarcely be lost on any reader. I have set out to change our perceptions of this Arthur by discussing texts that appear to be entirely unknown to Classical and Medieval Historians and Literary Scholars alike; and which appear to me to relocate the Arthurian World lock stock and barrel no further forward in time than the early first millennium BC, and in the East Mediterranean. No doubt some medieval British historians would be delighted to be relieved of a figure who has been at times an embarrassment and a burden, and of whose non-existence in the British Dark Ages they are already convinced; I am less than certain that classicists will be happy to find someone else’s literary and historical débris dumped on their doorstep.

Questions about the historicity of King Arthur are commonplace: there is general awareness that at least some of the legendary materials may be older than the traditional Dark Age date for Arthur himself. And the advancement of ‘new’ and allegedly ‘real’ Arthurian candidates is on the increase. An ‘oriental Arthur’ was suspected as early as the Middle Ages themselves, and most recently several non-British candidates have opened up new possibilities; but investigation has been frustrated by the lack of any new literary evidence. The present study investigates texts concerning several much older candidates and their wider context: they provide a new Arthurian complex, some of which is quite securely historical in certain respects, and long before the traditional British candidate of the early Dark Ages. The candidates include an Arktouros as such; and a voiced-dental form of the continental Artus, stated in a text not previously considered to be ‘greatest of knights’. I also offer candidates for Kay and Gawain, and more tentatively for Lancelot and the Lady of the Lake; prototypes for the Graal quest and Excalibur, and the Round Table; a standard adventure of Gawain, and as far as I am aware at least one new adventure for Arthur himself. There is evidence of early historical prestige for the legends, and for their romantic elaboration.

P R E F A C E

Whether this ‘Arthur-complex’ be accepted or not is less important than that it should be seriously studied and made known. Either it provides a new ‘real Arthur’ (among several new possibilities), or it should at least help to tell us why it seems to be so easy to produce ‘new’ candidates in the first place. Either way it deserves to be seen as a new branch of ancient fictional narrative, echoed in several literary genres, and pointing the way to a new Tristan story a thousand years earlier than Thomas or Béroul. It also reinforces the late medieval impression that there was knowledge of King Arthur in the East as well as the Celtic West.

This project first suggested itself as I found myself studying Old French literature in University College Dublin, when I realised that Béroul was using material I could readily recognise in classical texts. It gathered momentum when I came to approach the fragments of Nicolaus of Damascus in the early 1980s, but has had to wait a long time to come to the present formulation. I am grateful to Joseph Long, my tutor in Old French, and to the seminar in Medieval Studies in UCD, where I first encountered the Celtic dimension to Medieval Studies. I have had profitable conversation since with the late Tom Blagg, and with Ewen Bowie, Christopher Chaffin, Anna Chouhdri, Richard Gameson, Richard Eales, Arthur Keaveney, Angela and Peter Lucas, Richard Stoneman and Antony Ward. My own pupil Graham Mallaghan has contributed well beyond the call of duty in drawing my attention to items of bibliography I should otherwise have overlooked. I have also benefited a great deal from the advice of two anonymous Routledge referees, and from the personal generosity of Jack Zipes, who made available to me three newly collected Sicilian variants of the ‘Bear’s Son’ tale; and from sustained encouragement over more than three decades from the dedicatee, and from my wife.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AJPb	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
ALMA	<i>Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages</i>
AND	<i>Arthurian Name Dictionary</i>
CAH	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i>
CPh	<i>Classical Philology</i>
EM	<i>Enzyklopädie des Märchens</i>
FGrH	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i>
Gantz	<i>Early Greek Myth</i>
HB	'Nennius', <i>Historia Brittonum</i>
HRB	Geoffrey of Monmouth, <i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
Latham	<i>Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources</i>
LIMC	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i>
LSJ	<i>Liddell-Scott-Jones</i>
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PBA	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
PEG	<i>Poetae Epici Graeci</i>
PMG	<i>Poetae Melici Graeci</i>
PIR	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i>
PLRE	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i>
POxy	<i>Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i>
RE	<i>Realencyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i>
SBE	<i>Sacred Books of the East</i>

THE TRADITIONAL ARTHUR

King Arthur stands out among legendary figures as international, but particularly post-classical and particularly British.¹ In the late 1960s, when confidence was running high that an alliance of history and archaeology was about to reveal a genuine historical Arthur at the right time and place, this Britishness was taken for granted:

For many centuries now, the story of Arthur and his knights has been the chief myth of the island of Britain. It is far more than a medley of fireside tales. Only a theme answering to some deep sense of national character and need could have flourished for so long, or exerted such an influence on literature, art, and, occasionally, even politics.

So wrote the secretary of the Camelot Research Committee in 1968,² and many of the assumptions in this paragraph are still with us. In the same volume the same author reviews the popular associations of Arthur, and the limitations of their value for the historian, allowing himself a little flourish of what he intends as absurdity:

[The name Arthur] even occurs in the sky. Some Cornishmen call the Great Bear ‘Arthur’s Wain’. We could not safely infer that the *dux bellorum* anticipated the astronauts.³

We could most certainly infer that some Cornishmen *thought* he had, and we have a reasonable obligation to ask why. But the same assumption as quoted in the previous passage is at work here. The author does not ask how widespread the belief in Arthur’s celestial wain might have been, or whether it would have been equally accessible anywhere else in the area covered by the Roman Empire; nor does he ask when Cornishmen might have begun to adopt such a belief. This study sets out to challenge the kind of assumptions so clearly set forth in the passages quoted. I set out the evidence for two East Mediterranean Arthur-figures much earlier than the standard British example, one of them with celestial associations. But first we should look more closely at current conventional images of Arthur.

The ‘Arthurian problem’

An Arthur has been known in what purports to be historical record since the Nennian corpus in the ninth century AD. And this supposedly ‘historical’ Arthur who appears in the *Historia Brittonum* attributed to ‘Nennius’⁴ has been assigned more or less precise dating across the late fifth and early sixth centuries AD, allegedly taking part in battles at Badon and Camlann and dying in the early sixth century, according to entries in the *Annales Cambriae*.⁵ It is not till the early twelfth century that a fully-fledged Arthur-figure comes into his own in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Latin pseudo-chronicle, *The History of the Kings of Britain*; and later in the same century Arthur has his great springboard into Arthurian Romance in the French verse narratives of Chrétien de Troyes.⁶ Already in Chrétien his court is associated with an even more opaque and elusive theme, the quest for the Holy Graal; and there is a further subsidiary cycle, that of Tristan, which seems to join the complex very shortly afterwards. All three groups of tales flourish until well after the great compilation of Sir Thomas Malory which took Arthur into the age of printing.

Two kinds of doubt were raised about Arthur in the Middle Ages themselves: one already concerned his historical existence, a second was about where else accounts of him might be found. William of Newburgh in particular criticised Geoffrey of Monmouth for his expansive treatment of a king unknown to the Venerable Bede:⁷

Those the Venerable Bede describes as the bravest kings of the English, nobly ruling over the whole of Britain, Geoffrey makes mere princelings and lackeys of these men. So to ensure that we place our confidence in all details in Bede, of whose wisdom and sincerity there can be no doubt, that yarn-spinner (*fabulator*) and all his tales must without hesitation be rejected by all.

In modern times a steady doxography has built up for and against the idea of the ‘historical’ Arthur. The main impetus in recent decades has tended to come from the archaeological side: as Dark Age sites, particularly in southern Britain, have been more fully excavated, the tendency to tie them to likely Arthurian geography has increased. This approach was associated in the early 1970s with Leslie Alcock’s proposed identification of Arthur’s capital at Camelot with the heavily fortified site of South Cadbury; and it has increased with greater awareness of the archaeology of Arthur’s traditional birthplace of Tintagel, among much else. The underlying climate of opinion led John Morris not only to entitle his own synthesis on Dark Age Britain *The Age of Arthur*,⁸ but to see Arthur as the leading force in the British defence against Saxon invasion.

Morris took the simple and unguarded stance that Arthur’s reign and indeed ‘Empire’ was described by the contemporary ecclesiastical pamphleteer Gildas, who just happened not to mention the leader’s name:

THE TRADITIONAL ARTHUR

These institutions (criticised by Gildas) existed. They are not the institutions of a society that had entirely disintegrated, but of a society whose rulers were at least trying to rebuild the administrative order of the past. Arthur's government had only one possible and practicable aim, to restore and revive the Roman Empire in Britain.⁹

Arthur's name is insinuated into the last sentence as if there could have been no possible doubt when or indeed if he existed. This confidence was swept aside in a minimalist treatment of the early Welsh sources by David Dumville, for whom not one of the 'facts' of Arthur's career as offered by 'Nennius' in the ninth century could be substantiated by the critical standards of textually based historians. On the other hand, the Welsh sources of later date but clearly earlier character were felt not unreasonably to deal with a figure of the world of myth:

We need to understand the sources, motives, and technical terminology of each of our writers. We cannot accept a text, or an item in a text, simply on the ground that it appears to derive from tradition. This all too common excuse is by itself meaningless. What is 'tradition'? Whose tradition? Monastic, legal, craft tradition? And once we begin to ask questions of this sort, we are forced to ask ourselves about the processes of transmission, with all the further questions and critical judgments which that implies.¹⁰

The argument for meticulous source-criticism was well made, and stemmed the tide of speculation and presumption at least for a while. But as Thomas Charles-Edwards argues, in a more compromising stance,¹¹ there are times when a later age may have a less biased perspective than a contemporary eye-witness (particularly one as partisan as the sixth-century Gildas); and there is at least something to be said for noting convergences of sources and types of sources whose individual contributions might be less than persuasive in themselves. And in fact Dumville actually comes close to acknowledging that within his limitations as a synchronising historian 'Nennius' seems to have made the best of a bad job.

Even the most sceptical approach¹² cannot expect to disprove the existence of 'an' Arthur, though it can make us wary of relying on 'no smoke without fire' in Dumville's phrase. But the origin of the legend has still to be accounted for, and some explanation offered of much-maligned or ill-defined 'tradition'. In the 1980s and 1990s archaeology has still further continued excursions into historicising the legend, again by balancing probabilities of actual sites of supposedly 'Arthurian' activity. The latest accounts of this kind I have seen include arguments for an Arthur wounded in his last battle of Camlann and carried out of a military career to Whithorn in Galloway, duly identified with Avallon, and thus to a tomb in Scotland;¹³ or south to an Avallon in Bardsey

island, thence to identification with a soldier-Saint Arthmael in Brittany, with similar result.¹⁴

Those who wish to account for a historical core to the legend have two angles of approach: either one can study the ‘right’ period of the fifth and sixth centuries AD¹⁵ and find candidates of some other name who for some reason take on the name or title Arthur; or one looks for Arthurs of almost any period from the second to the eighth centuries AD who were wrongly connected to the historical vacuum between Roman withdrawal and Saxon invasions that Arthur himself is meant to have filled. It should be stressed that neither procedure is either absurd or unsound in itself. The trouble always is that with so little to go on, and such generally unspecific source material available, almost any candidate can be plausibly made to ‘fit’ after a fashion the nebulous historical probabilities available. Guesswork tends to proliferate in hypothesis after hypothesis in relating the Arthurian materials to individual sites: there seems an almost insatiable appetite, especially in semi-popular books about Arthur, for trying to pin the king’s supposed court at Camelot down to south-western England or south Wales, or the north as far as lowland Scotland:¹⁶ all of this can further be complicated by the idea that the prestige of the name Arthur, once established, is likely to cause the use of the name itself to proliferate, so that achievements of several different Arthurs of more than one period might plausibly coalesce to form a composite.

There is a certain fixity about the key personnel, though a great deal of spelling variation as both Latin and the medieval vernaculars struggle to transcribe basically unfamiliar names. We expect variants of the name Arthur in British sources, but in French and German romances more often variants of Artus;¹⁷ a colleague and stepbrother Kay offers such variants as Kai, Kei, Caius or Cato; a nephew Gawain might appear as Gavain, Gowan, Walwannus or Walwain (as well as Gwalchmai in Welsh sources); and a Queen Guinevere as anything from Ginover to Winlogee. Among minor characters there is a persistently villainous Maelwas or Meleagant, and the ever-lengthening cast-list extends to such figures as the Lischois who makes a single appearance in Wolfram von Eschenbach, or the Curses/Surses who figures as the supporter of Arthur’s enemy King Cladas in the Vulgate Lancelot.¹⁸

When we come to the Holy Graal texts, there is a good deal more fluidity still: the Graal itself can be a platter, a chalice, or a stone with a beam of light, appearing in a Graal castle where it sustains a maimed king whose Waste Land the Graal knight has to restore by asking the right question.¹⁹ The maimed king and his often complex family are likewise fugitive and elusive in their identity.

The most plausible situations that historicisers tend to present are clusters of material where different strands of Arthurian or quasi-Arthurian material can be treated together. It is relatively easy to localise the Tristan legend in the literary sources to a quite narrow area of Cornwall, where a Drustanus son of Cunomorus is epigraphically attested in an early Dark Age context;²⁰ and

then to look at the Arthurian connexions with Tintagel on the opposite coast, and the location of Camelot at South Cadbury.²¹ But such clusters of evidence do not preclude alternatives, especially if their dates are early.

But much of such scholarship is seriously frustrated by the fact that the sub-Roman communications of Britain would still have enabled relatively rapid movement, so that the phenomenon of a moving field headquarters across a number of areas could still have left a local tradition in a number of different places, all of them with an incentive to claim a prestigious figure as theirs.²² The prevalence of similar place-names in different but linguistically united areas produces just such an effect: there is a specifically named Avallon in Britanny,²³ to rival the Glastonbury and Whithorn sites; and more than one Camlann in mid-Wales to rival the strongly supported Camelford in Cornwall.²⁴

There are also the risks of some fallacious or circular methods. For example, Castleden claims that ‘there was an Arthur-shaped gap between 500 and 540’;²⁵ one might well so claim, but claimants will always run the risk of fashioning their Arthur to suit the gap itself. Those who attempt to narrate a continuous history run the risk of converting speculation or even wishful thinking into fact: even Morris was not exempt from this,²⁶ and some of the more archaeological approaches have in the past been no less unguarded.

A recurrent problem is the sheer charismatic appeal of finding ‘the real Arthur’: it is somehow assumed that there *must* be one, and only one, in defiance of normal and well-attested tendencies in the behaviour of legendary material. From this point of view, indeed, the idea of *an* Arthur conflating several different but perhaps similarly named figures is attractive: one thinks of the Egyptian legend of Herodotus’ conflation of several pharaohs into a composite Sesonchosis.²⁷

Last and most important of these assumptions is that the literature is all late and the subject himself completely fixed in time and place. This runs counter to the tendency of migratory legend:²⁸ even if it has to start *somewhere*, the likelihood of our being able to penetrate it early enough may be slimmer than we suppose. We can only be sure of our historical grounds if there are no *other* Arthur-figures elsewhere that are clearly attested as earlier.

The ‘Arthur of history’: annals and archaeology

We can look briefly, then, at how much or how little we have to anchor King Arthur in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. The one contemporary witness who could have told us does not do so: Gildas writes a lamenting and strongly sermonising account of his age in the *De Excidio Britanniae* (‘On the Ruin of Britain’), and deplores the present state of the British nation after Roman withdrawal in the face of Saxon threat.²⁹ Names, where they are mentioned, in particular that of Vortigern, generally stand up to historical scrutiny, but

the only major figure where we should expect an Arthur to be is a figure bearing the thoroughly Roman name Ambrosius Aurelianus.³⁰ To be sure a major battle only much later associated with Arthur's name is mentioned, the battle of Badon;³¹ a battle-list given by 'Nennius' in the ninth century links it with 'our' Arthur. We can see the impasse this creates: to any who wish King Arthur to be a legendary figment, it can be claimed that there is no contemporary evidence; those who wish to find a 'real' Arthur in the appropriate period have to find reasons why he should not have been mentioned. One would be that Arthur had killed Gildas' brother,³² another that Gildas' sermonising style rarely permits the naming of names. While either reason will account for the silence, neither, nor their combination, can actually *prove* that there was an Arthur there to mention. By the time the King appears in 'Nennius', so the negative argument runs, he will be a figure of legend embroidered into a period too distant and sparsely documented to be able to reject him.³³

That there is room of a kind for such a figure is not itself in doubt: what is implied in the sparse contemporary history of Gildas and any later plausible historical tradition, and the rapidly increasing archaeological record, is that a leader of a sub-Roman British warrior band would have held off the Saxon invasions for a considerable time.³⁴ It has been the signal service of Higham's new *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* to query even this, as a construct which may itself have been shaped by the agenda of later historians from 'Nennius' onwards, because of its supposed relevance to their own view of the past.³⁵

Such iron-age hillforts as South Cadbury or the former Roman base at Caerleon in south Wales could indeed have served as fortified bases from which to harass invaders;³⁶ the former Roman road system would still have sustained rapid movement so that a leader could move more rapidly over much of Britain than would have been possible in Norman times, for example. But such a leader need not have been 'Arthur', at least by name. It has been pointed out that in particular the insular leader Riothamus was active in the late fifth century³⁷ (in conventional chronology), but most probably a generation before the 'Age of Arthur', both in England and in Armorica. Anyone who wishes to assimilate him to 'Arthur' may of course do so, and such an assimilation would certainly help to account for later tradition that Arthur won victories on the Continent as well as in Britain. But it will not, again, give us 'our' Arthur without a measure of special pleading: the name itself is just not where we want it to be, any more than it is to be explicitly found in Gildas himself.

If we wish to take a strictly chronological stance, then, there are no absolutely unequivocal contemporary candidates for Arthur at the right time; that is no reason why legendary materials will not have been drafted in to fill the gap; nor does it preclude the possibility that some suspicion of some truth might attach to them. But something has to be made to account for the concentration of legendary materials round a specifically named figure.³⁸ This may *in extremis* be due to sheer invention; or the more strongly favoured

possibility that there must be *some* reason for the accumulation of so much material round a single central figure.

'Nennius' and Geoffrey of Monmouth are no easier to disentangle: the former claims a list of twelve battles in which Arthur fought, and might conceivably have annexed an early Welsh battle-poem to supply his information;³⁹ and because of uncertainty in the transmission of the 'Nennian' corpus itself it is difficult to disentangle what and how much of this information is earlier than 'Nennius', attributable to the author himself, or the subject of later interpolation. Here Arthur is a *dux bellorum*, and a Christian, performing a battle-miracle.⁴⁰ Even if, however, Nennius is difficult to use, it does not mean once more that there is not an element of plausibility in the battle-list itself: a whole sequence of scholars have offered a more or less plausible sequence of sites;⁴¹ but that, once more, is not enough to attest the existence of the king to whom they can have become attached. The battles have been almost tediously rearranged to suit just about any 'local' interpretation of supposed military campaigns. If a King Arthur were *already* established, for example, it would be perfectly natural to attach his name to impressively fortified sites or strategic river-crossings where crucial actions might be fought.

The Arthur of un-history: myth, legend, folktale, romance

For the Dark Age historian the legendary Arthur is a figure of only marginal interest; but for the formation of the legend itself every avenue has still to be explored. We can actually test the accumulation of legend around another late Romano-British figure to show the metamorphosis that has taken place in a similar situation. The Roman commander Magnus Maximus took his troops over to the Continent in the late fourth century to contest the sovereignty of Rome itself.⁴² That he died before succeeding does not stop the development of a British legend: in the *Mabinogi* preserved in late medieval Welsh manuscript tradition we have a tale of Maxim Wledic side by side with a group of traditional Arthurian tales. It is not too difficult to separate the legendary accretion from the verifiable historical materials in this one instance – no guarantee in itself that the case of Arthur will be as straightforward. The essential difference is that we actually *have* the historical sources to prove the existence of Maximus, and in the right context: we have no such guarantee for Arthur.

Not that there is any lack of native British material to which Arthur has become attached. His dog leaves a footprint in stone in Arthur's hunt for a great boar; his men go off to Ireland in three ships to recover the cauldron of Annwfn, and only seven return; or he and his associates fail to steal a pig from Tristan.⁴³ And there has been no lack of surviving local British oral folklore about Arthur: Ruth Tongue collected Arthurian traditions from Sewingshields in Somerset, of a shepherd who discovers the sleeping Arthurian court, but out