

# ARTORIUS, AMBROSIUS, ARTHUR:

## Questing for the historical Arthur, King of Britons

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He who became known as Arthur of Britain lived in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Roman occupation of Britain, begun in A.D. 47, was over and memories of Roman civilization were already fading. The Saxon invasions from the continent were growing in size, frequency, and ferocity. The protective legions were gone. Briton clans, unable to unite in their own defense, fragmented further. From this desperate situation emerged a leader who successfully rallied the Britons and halted Saxon expansion for a time. This is the anonymous man who became the medieval symbol of just sovereignty, King Arthur.

The historical identity of Arthur is elusive. Hints and small clues abound, yet no single existing chronicle solidly identifies him. The *De Excidio Britanniae et Conquestu* of Gildas is the only eyewitness account of the period between Roman Britain and Saxon England, the darkest in British history. Gildas did not mention Arthur by name in his manuscript. Nonetheless, Arthur's story begins with the *De Excidio* and the end of Roman Britain.

The breakdown of Roman Britain began in 367 when Picts and Scots[1] attacked in combination. Hadrian's Wall, which had held the northern tribes for several centuries, was breached. The Middle Country was overrun and governments ceased to function. Two years later the commander Theodosius arrived; his forces subdued the invaders and rebuilt the Wall. For fifteen years there was a respite from northern attack. Ironically, the next blow to the Britons would come from a fellow Roman.

In 383 Magnus Maximus, self-proclaimed Emperor in Britain, withdrew his legions from the island and crossed into Gaul, driven by an ambition to seize the Western Empire.

*After this, Britain, deprived of all her armed soldiery, her military supplies, her rulers, cruel though they were, and her vigorous youth, who . . . never more returned home . . . [Britain,] entirely ignorant of the whole practice of war, being exposed for the first time to be trampled on by two foreign nations, exceedingly cruel, the Scots from the north-west, and the Picts from the north, lies for many years stunned and groaning.[2]*

Ambassadors were sent to Rome with letters pleading for help. According to Gildas, they returned with a legion and subdued the invaders. The Roman Stilicho removed the force in 401 to combat the Goths on the continent. Finally, in 407, the usurper Constantine III took more troops into Gaul. The Britons, dependent for centuries on the protection of Rome, were left defenseless.

Another appeal was sent, this time to Honorius in Rome, for help against the continuing Pictish and Scottish incursions. The year in which the Goths overran Rome, 410, brought his reply: the Britons must see to their own security as best they could. Sadly, their best was insufficient; the northern wars continued. Famine struck. Gildas recorded the Briton's final plea for help to "Aetius, Consul for the third time" in Rome.[3] No help came.

Then, after a period free of foreign invasion, civil strife erupted as competition for power among rival warlords began:

*Kings were anointed not by God, but who should stand out more cruel than the rest, and after a little were murdered by the anointers . . . [4]*

One, in later accounts called Vortigern, emerged supreme.

Britain's "old enemies," the Picts and the Scots, who had been checked for a time, suddenly launched another fierce attack. Then came the plague. The manpower shortage which gave priority to fighting the Picts left the dead unburied. The invasion threatened to overwhelm them; Vortigern was forced to hire assistance. Gildas told how "the proud tyrant" enlisted the Saxon mercenary forces of two Saxon brothers against the northern raiders:[5]

*A council was convened, to decide upon the best and soundest means of withstanding the frequent brutal invasions and raids of the aforesaid peoples. All the members of the council, and the proud tyrant, were struck blind . . . . To hold back the northern peoples, they introduced into the island the vile unspeakable Saxons, hated of God and man alike.*[6]

In return for their services, Vortigern gave the Saxons the island of Thanet and goods to support their settlements.[7] Later, reinforcements were imported. The alliance held until the Saxons increased their demand for supplies. When Vortigern would not pay, the Saxons mutinied. They stormed the island, burning towns and cities. Many Britons died; others fled across the Channel to Brittany or were enslaved. Another group retreated to the mountains and dense forests; among these survivors was Ambrosius Aurelianus.[8]

A descendant of a Roman family, Ambrosius organized a coalition of former supporters of the Empire to resist the Saxons.

*Thenceforward, sometimes our citizens and sometimes the enemy had the best of it, until the year of the siege of the Mons Badonicus, almost the last and not the least slaughter of the villains . . .*[9]

The Venerable Bede wrote a history of England *circa* 731. He told the same story as Gildas, but with a small difference. The "proud tyrant" became King Vortigern and the Saxon brothers became Hengest and Horsa. Bede described the siege of Mount Badon but he, like Gildas, did not mention Arthur. In fact, Arthur did not appear in recorded history until *circa* 796 in a compilation by the monk Nennius, called the *Historia Brittonum*. In it, not only was Arthur *dux bellorum* over the British kings at Mount Badon (Mons Badonicus), but the siege itself was also the capstone conflict of eleven previous battles led by Arthur.

The written evidence begs the question: what reason is there to believe that Arthur was present at Badon, if the two earliest British histories did not see fit to mention him? Three arguments justify a continuing investigation. First, no other individual's name had previously been attached to the siege of Badon.

Second, tales of Arthur from the *Vitae*, or Lives, of the Saints Cadoc, Carannog, Gildas (the same), and Padarn, all dating from the twelfth century or later, portray Arthur negatively. In the *Vitae* he is a sort of military despot who tried to plunder the property of Welsh monasteries.[10] Arthur, for whatever reason, aroused hostility in the only group of people who wrote. The result may have been the omission of his name from clerical histories for three hundred years.[11]

Third, the nature of Nennius's history makes his identification of Arthur with Badon plausible. The *Historia Brittonum* is a strange and disconnected collection. In his preface to the work, Nennius admitted

*I have heaped together all I have found in Roman annals and in the chronicles of the holy fathers, that is Jerome, Eusebius, Isidore and Prosper, and of the Scots and Saxons, and from ancient tradition.*[12]

Nennius strung his material together in rough chronological order without bothering to reconcile inconsistencies between sections of his work. His claim that he worked from both British and Saxon sources is evident in his two versions of the Vortigern story. In one, Vortigern invited Hengest and Horsa to Britain; in the other, the Saxons came as exiles.[13] The very awkwardness of his handling of the material suggests a variety of sources and minimal manipulation of them.

If Badon was considered an important event, then why didn't Gildas mention the victorious general? Maybe he did. Since Ambrosius is the only person Gildas did name, perhaps he was the commander at Badon.

To test this theory, approximate dates must be established. Gildas's chronology was loose, almost non-existent. Dating the siege of Badon hangs on one ambiguous passage in the *De Excidio*:

*. . . the year of the siege of the Mons Badonicus . . . a year which as I know is the forty-fourth after one month elapsed which is also that of my birth.*[14]

Several interpretations of this passage exist. Bede understood it to mean that the siege of Badon occurred forty-four years and one month after the *adventus Saxonum* (the arrival of the Saxons in Britain), that is, 493. This does not follow from existing manuscripts of Gildas, all of which postdate Bede by several centuries. Scribal errors may have corrupted later manuscripts, but upon this one can only speculate.

Contemporary opinion on the date of Badon is split. One interpretation measures from Ambrosius's rise to power, about which Gildas had been speaking in the previous chapter.[15] This places Badon between 499 and 511, depending on which date is used for Ambrosius. Another theory, a variation on Bede's reading of Gildas, dates Badon between 516 and 518.[16] A third opinion is that Gildas meant he was born in the year of the siege, forty-four years and one month before he wrote. The *De Excidio* was written between 540 and 547, which dates Badon around 500.[17] This last interpretation, plus or minus a year, is the most widely accepted date.

Badon therefore occurred between 499 and 518. Ambrosius probably came to power between 455 and 467.[18] Assuming he was at least twenty years old at the time of his ascent, he would have been between fifty-two and eighty-three at the time of Badon.[19] Given the latest date for Ambrosius (455), the earliest date for the siege (499), and the youngest starting age for Ambrosius, it is possible though not probable that he was the general at Badon.

Regardless of the identity of the anonymous victor of Badon, Gildas's silence must be explained. The content of the *De Excidio* shows that it was not Gildas's main purpose to write history. The *De Excidio* was rather a denunciation of the British people for their sins and an exhortation for them to repent.[20] The history contained in the *De Excidio* was, for Gildas's purpose, only an introduction to the condemnation which followed. He did not write for posterity. He wrote to the people of his day. If this is so, perhaps there was no need to name the victor at Badon. When Gildas wrote, it was probably common knowledge.

It seems at first that Bede, the respected historian and scholar, should have named Arthur if he had indeed led the siege of Badon. After all, Bede did provide the names of Vortigern, Hengest, and Horsa. Perhaps it was his own meticulous scholarship which prevented him. Bede's account of fifth century Britain is paraphrased from Gildas, with few additions.[21] Though he did not name them, Gildas did describe the individuals whom Bede called Vortigern, Hengest, and Horsa. Gildas did not, on the other hand, ascribe the siege of Badon to any particular individual, named or unnamed. Gildas's omission became Bede's omission. Unlike the lesser historian Nennius, Bede may not have seen fit to include the "ancient tradition" of Arthur, which probably consisted of oral and bardic accounts, in his academically correct history.

A third possibility is that the siege of Badon was not considered important enough to detail. It was not recorded by Saxon chroniclers as such.[22] Yet it was the only conflict named by Gildas, suggesting that it was at least important to him, a Briton. Assuming, then, that Arthur may have been the British commander at Badon, the twelve battles outlined in the *Historia Brittonum* should be explored. According to Nennius,

*Then Arthur fought against those men in those days with the kings of the Britons, but he was the leader of battles. The first battle was in the mouth of the river which is called Glein. The second and third and fourth and fifth on [sic] another river which is called Dubglas and is in the region Linnuis. The sixth battle on [sic] the river which is called Bassas. The seventh battle was in the forest of Celidon, that is Cat Coit Celidon. The eighth battle was at the fort of Guinnion, in which Arthur carried the image of the blessed Mary . . . . The ninth battle was fought in the city of the Legion. He fought the tenth battle on the shore of the river called Tribruit. The eleventh battle was fought on the mountain called Agned. The twelfth battle was at Badon Hill . . . .*[23]

Scholarly speculation is divided on the locations of the battlesites. Identifications which seem obvious indicate a campaign which spanned the Isle of Britain, from the southwest (Badon) to the northeast (Celidon Forest); this raises two questions. First, could one man have traversed the distance between twelve far-flung battlesites within reasonable chronological parameters? Second, what was Arthur doing as far north as Scotland? There is no evidence from the sixth century to suggest that Saxon settlement had expanded further north than the southern one-quarter of the island.

The site of Mount Badon is unknown, despite the efforts of researchers. Badon is traditionally associated with Bath because of the similarity of the names, though there is no solid evidence to support the assumption. The *Annales Cambriae*, which dated Badon at 516, also listed a *bellum Badonis secundo*, a second battle of Badon, in 665. If this meant a retaking of Badon, then the search for Badon should be in an area the Saxons had reached by 516 but had not conquered by 665.[24] The county of Dorset on the south central coast of the island is the most likely candidate. The Saxons were at its borders at the beginning of the sixth century, but the British held it until *circa* 658-710.[25] Two British hill forts in Dorsetshire merit attention, those at Badbury and Banbury. Badbury is tempting; rings of defensive earthworks surround the site. The name, with its "Bad-" prefix, strengthens the identification.[26] Another possible site in Dorset is Banbury, which also has earthen defenses and a hill fort. Neither of these sites has been excavated. The specific location of Badon remains speculative.

Applying linguistics, geography, and philology to the names from the list of battles, a coherent campaign has been reconstructed by W. G. Collingwood.[27] He assumed that all sites should be located in Sussex in southeast Britain, the county west of Kent, where the Saxons were settled. Collingwood proposed that the first battle at the mouth of River Glein was on the River Glynde in Sussex.[28] The Glynde, though, does not actually have a mouth; it flows not into the sea, but into another river, the Ouse. In its favor, the area described is a natural pass from Kent to Sussex.



Locating the second through fifth battles is either a problem or a blessing, depending on how vague or specific one wants to be. "Dubglas," which means "dark stream" or "black water," was a fairly common river name. Collingwood identified the Dubglas with a branch of the Medway River, the Kent, which as late as 1288 was called "le Black." Accounting for the connection of the region of Linnuis to the site, he claimed that it derived from the district of East Rothbury, again in Sussex, which in 697 was called Liminea. After a repulse at the Glynde, Collingwood suggested that the Kentish Saxons would next try to force their way west through this area.[29]

On the location of the sixth battle on the River Bassas, Collingwood did not speculate.[30] As to the seventh, traditionally placed in the Caledonian Wood in Scotland, Collingwood asserted that "Celidon" was a generic term applied to forests in Britain.[31] The Weald, a dense wood spanning Kent and Sussex through which a Roman road ran, was Collingwood's site of choice. He supposed the Saxons would next attack Chichester.[32]

The battle of the fort of "Guinnion" is interpreted by Collingwood as a translation of the Welsh "Caer Gwent." However, he dismissed the obvious choices, Caerwent or Caerleon,[33] as being too far west. Caer Gwent suggested to him a Roman town called "Venta-something," which he found in Venta Belagarum, today called Winchester.[34]

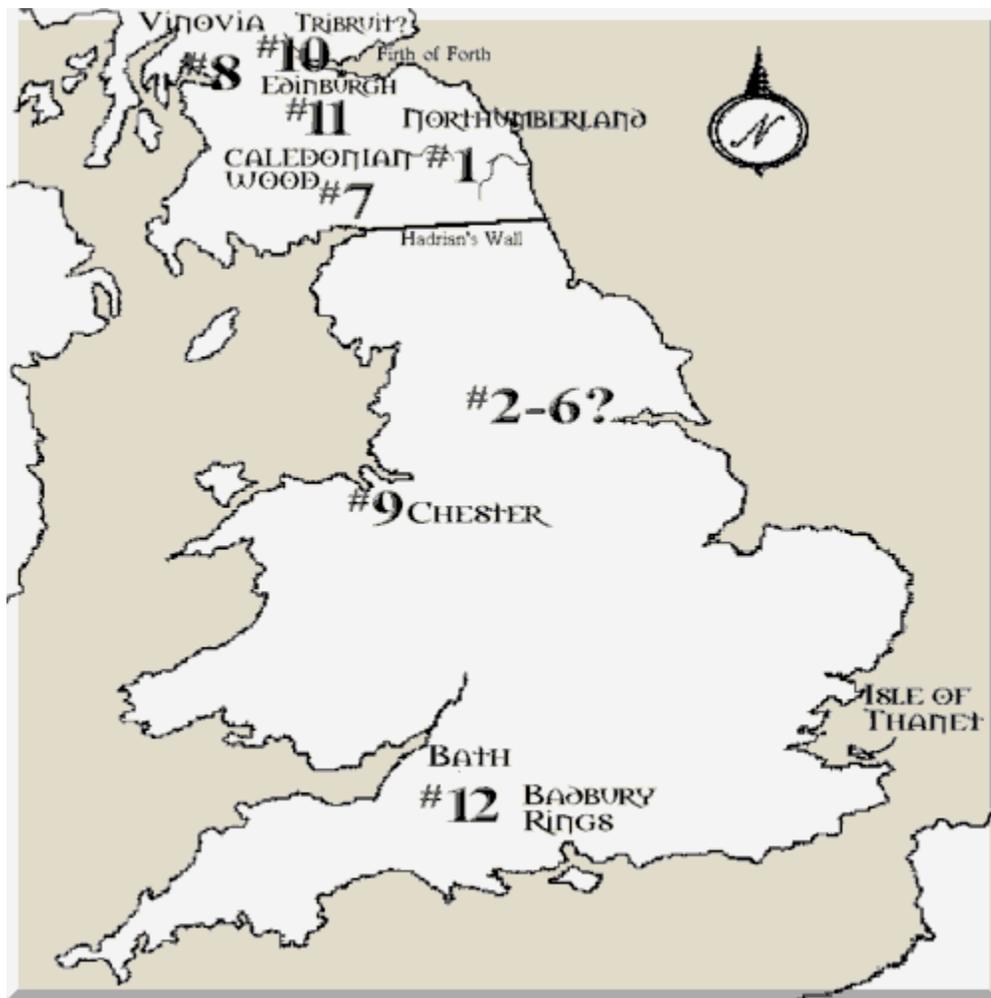
The ninth battle, in the City of the Legion, Collingwood put at Porchester. He based this on an entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which described a Saxon landing at Portsmouth. Porchester (Roman Portus Adurni) was home to a Roman fort, though no legion was actually stationed there. Collingwood's interpretation assumed that the centuries had expanded its importance in the memory of the people to legionary status.[35]

Tribruit, the tenth, recorded in some Nennian manuscripts as Trät Trevoit, was broken down by Collingwood as follows:

*traeth* = Welsh for "tidal estuary;"  
*tri* = "three," or perhaps "crossing."  
*brit/brute/briw* = "rushing," as a river;

With admittedly weak evidence, he concluded that Tribruit may have meant the triple estuary of Chichester harbor with the tide running.[36]

Mount Agned, or Bregion, also gave Collingwood problems. Resorting again to the theory of generic terminology, he proposed that "Bregion" meant "of the hills," and suggested vaguely that it was somewhere in Sussex. On Badon, the twelfth and most important, Collingwood had no new insights, though he rejected the predominant opinion that it was at Bath or the Badbury Rings. Though inconclusive, Collingwood's thesis fits neatly with the assumption that Arthur's twelve battles were fought against Saxons.



Arguments for northern sites are more obvious. River Glein is commonly associated with the Glen in Northumberland. The location of battles two through five, on the Dubglas, describes many areas in Britain, and the sixth, on River Bassas, is still unidentified. The seventh is usually placed in the Caledonian Forest in Scotland and the eighth, Fort Guinnion, at Vinovia near the Antonine Wall, also in Scotland. Chester is equated with the City of the Legion of the ninth battle. The River Tribruit is put near the Firth of Forth, based on a reference in an ancient Welsh poem to "Tryvrwyd." [37]

Agned, called Bregion in the Vatican manuscript, is assigned to the present day location of Edinburgh Castle. [38] So far so good, but the problem with a set of predominantly northern sites is that it leaves Badon unexplained. All indicators, though they are few, suggest that Badon was fought against Saxons and the Saxons were in the extreme southern part of the island.

One scrap of written evidence supports several of the northern sites. A body of work known collectively as the Four Ancient Books contains collections of short items arranged in threes, called the Welsh Triads. The Triads' origins were in the bardic tradition, probably mnemonic devices used to train apprentices. The function of the bard was to preserve the deeds of his sponsor and his ancestors, and to keep genealogies. [39]

There is general agreement among scholars that the Triads do contain a core of authentic material, though they cannot be cited as hard historical evidence. No surviving manuscripts of the Four Books date before the twelfth century.

One of the four books, *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, contains a verse which may shed some light on the location of the battles at Tribruit and Agned:

*Did not Manawyd bring back  
A pierced shield from Tryvrwyd? . . .  
They fell a hundred at a time  
Before Bodwyr . . .  
On the shores of Tryvrwyd.[40]*

Manawyd is conceivably an eponym for the Picts of Manaw, an area between Edinburgh and Stirling in Scotland. Though no particular river can be identified with the name Tribruit, the general location suggests the Firth of Forth, an estuary.[41]

The same poem mentions a battle fought on a hill: "On the Mount of Eidyn / He fought with champions. . ."[42]

The eleventh battle, called either Agned (Welsh *annedd*, "dwelling") or Bregion (Celtic *brega*, "hill"), if it followed the battle of Tribruit, could be the same as the Mount of Eidyn. Eidyn was an area within modern Midlothian in Scotland; "mount" suggests the hill where Castle Edinburgh today stands.[43]

Besides linguistic similarities between Tryvrwyd and Tribruit, Eidyn and Agned, the only other strand connecting Arthur to either of these sites is the reference to Bodwyr. In the Welsh Triads Bodwyr, later called Bedwyr or Bedivere in the Arthurian romance cycle, was one of the earliest associates of Arthur. Arthur is not named in the Triad, yet the ancient link between Arthur and Bodwyr provides a small amount of muscle for this interpretation.

Another of the Four Ancient Books, the *Book of Taliessin*, contains a Triad which told of "*kat gellawr brewyn*," or the battle in the cells of Brewyn.[44]

The similarity between the Bregion (or Breguoin) of Nennius and Brewyn cannot be overlooked either; however, in the Triad the battle is attributed to Uriens, who ruled Rheged, just southwest of Hadrian's Wall. It is easy to suppose, then, that the battles of Tribruit and Agned might have been Bodwyr's alone. This is possible; Nennius's list must therefore be reconsidered.

The list of Nennius could have been appropriated from an entire list from another source, perhaps an early annal, now lost. Annals-style recordkeeping gave one line, with a Roman numeral, to each year. Rarely was more than one event recorded *per annum*, and often years were left blank. If such a list was Nennius's source, the duration of the twelve battles would represent from a minimum of twelve to twenty or more years,[45] a long time to maintain such vigorous generalship. The *Annales Cambriae*, an addendum to the main text of Nennius, dated Mount Badon in 516 and Arthur's death in 537. If this is accurate, then in addition to twenty years of Saxon-subduing, Arthur would have had another twenty-one years of keeping them subdued, a tall order for any man.

More likely is that Nennius borrowed or compiled a list, of source obscure, then stuck Badon on the end and attributed them all to Arthur. That would certainly be consistent with Nennius's style, and would explain the difficulty of creating a coherent, focused campaign from his twelve battlesites. It would also account for another inconsistency in the *Historia Britonum*. In his list of twelve battles, Nennius wrote that in the eighth battle Arthur carried the image of the blessed Mary on his shield, and with her help inflicted great slaughter upon the enemies. Later, the *Annales Cambriae* told how Arthur carried the Holy Cross at Badon for three nights and days, and with this supernatural assistance, inflicted great slaughter upon the enemies. The similarity is obvious, yet the *Annales* did not mention the eighth battle, and the list of Nennius did not

mention the Holy Cross at Badon. The confused Christian symbol-carrying further suggests a borrowed, unsynthesized list.

This may also explain the variation between the Harleian and Vatican manuscripts' accounts of the eleventh battle. Unlike the "Cair Lion" addition to the Vatican manuscript which was apparently added as a clarification, the two descriptions of the eleventh battlesite differ completely. Perhaps Agned and Breguoin were not the same; rather, they may have been the eleventh and twelfth battles in the list borrowed by Nennius.[46] Since Christian symbology was apparently a common element in such lists, Christian numerology was probably equally as critical. If so, Nennius could not just stick an extra battle on the end to total thirteen. He would also have to eliminate one to maintain the orthodox number of twelve.[47]

Therefore, the first eleven battles of Nennius's list and Mount Badon should perhaps be treated as two separate sets of events. The question is, where was Arthur? If he was at Badon, Gildas did not record it. Since both Arthur and the other eleven battles made their first appearances in the *Historia Brittonum*, it is reasonable to assume that they are connected. Perhaps the "old enemies" described by Gildas, the Picts and the Scots, were keeping Arthur busy in the north.

The north-south division of military operations is reminiscent of the old Roman offices of *comes Britanniae*, *comes littoris Saxonici*, and *dux Britanniarum*. These offices were created sometime in the mid to late fourth century to meet the particular needs of Britain. As the link to Rome was severed, these positions, as well as the remains of Roman government, became less formal.[48] The *comes Britanniae*, or Count of Britain, had a roving commission to defend the island wherever it was needed. The *dux Britanniarum*, Duke of Britain, had charge of forces in the north and was stationed at York. The *comes littoris Saxonici*, Count of the Saxon Shore, commanded in the south.[49] Nennius referred to Arthur as *dux bellorum*, conceivably a corruption or adaptation of *dux Britanniarum*. If the first eleven battles of Arthur are in the north against Picts and Scots, then he fits the description of the office well.

An inscribed *arca* from Dalmatia records the career of a Roman soldier, Lucius Artorius Castus. His last post was *praefectus* in Britain, commanding the VI Victrix legion at York, south of Hadrian's Wall. While there, he was appointed *dux* to put down a rebellion in Brittany. It is interesting that the names "Arthur" and "Artorius," the Roman *gens* from which "Arthur" derives, were both extremely rare before the twelfth century. Artorius was posted in the late second century, making him an unlikely prototype for the historical Arthur, but he may have left namesake descendants in northern Britain.[50]

In the *De Excidio*, after the Saxons rebelled, Gildas made no further mention of Picts and Scots. The Saxons, originally enlisted to assist in their suppression, may have done their jobs well. Gildas, ardently anti-Saxon, never explicitly stated that they actually fought on the side of the Britons against the "old enemies." His narrative, however, implies that they did. First, a group of Saxons arrived and were settled. Then a second group was enlisted. If the first group had not been fighting for the Britons, why would a second enlistment have been needed? It is likely that the Picts and Scots were effectively subdued by the time of the Saxon uprising.

Then if Arthur was *dux Britanniarum*, he may have fought with the Saxons, not against them.[51] This defies all tradition. Nonetheless, if Gildas's later silence on the "old enemies" meant that they were passive during and after the Saxon revolt, then Arthur's northern victories may have occurred before the uprising. Immediately after his account of the Briton's plea to Aetius in 446, Gildas wrote:

*And then, for the first time, they began to inflict slaughters on the foes, for many years of plundering the land . . .*

*For a little time the boldness of foes quieted, not, however, the wickedness of our people. . . . .*  
.....

*The Picts in the extreme part of the island then for the first time and afterwards settled down, at times effecting spoils and desolations.*

*While devastation was quiescent, . . . the island began to flow with such great supplies of riches, that no age previously had remembered . . .[52]*

Several years of moral degeneration (one of Gildas's favorite topics) and freedom from foreign invasions followed. Then came the final attack from the north; for a while, the invaders gained no ground. Then the plague struck. It was at this time that the fateful council was called.

Said Gildas: "For counsel is begun as to what best or what most advantageous ought to be [done] to repel such deadly and such frequent irruptions and plunderings of the [northern] nations." [53] He gave no specifics as to the makeup of the council. Logically, it would have been comprised of the strongest leaders and men of high rank. The *dux Britanniarum*, as one of the three highest officers in the British military command structure, might have been included on those grounds alone; but as the high officer specifically in charge of defending northern Britain, he was undoubtedly included. Gildas continued: "Then it was that all the counsellors, together with the proud tyrant" [54] decided to enlist the aid of the Saxons.

This leads to a blasphemous question which must be addressed: could Arthur have been the unnamed proud tyrant at the council? The word "Vortigern" might have been synonymous with "proud tyrant;" that is, it was a title, not a proper name. [55] Other early references to Arthur described him in similar terms. Two of the thirty-three surviving Nennius manuscripts included an extra phrase, "mab Uter," inserted in the paragraph which referred to Arthur as *dux bellorum*. In context, "mab Uter" translated as "terrible warrior," or "horrible son." [56] Hagiographic references to Arthur in the *Vita Gildae* and the *Vita Paterni* called him *rex rebellis* and *tyrannus*, [57] which seems to suggest that Arthur was perceived as something of a martial brute.

Gildas did not tell much about the proud tyrant. Neither did Bede. In the *Historia Brittonum*, however, written 250 years after Gildas, the wild exploits of Vortigern are laid out in lurid detail. Nennius depicted him as a weak, treacherous man who betrayed his countrymen to the Saxons for cheap bribes. He had at least two wives, the daughter of Hengest as well as one of his own daughters. [58] He also had a supernatural experience involving a boy prophet named Ambrosius while trying to build a tower. Finally, he died in fear and disgrace. Even though the Vortigern of Nennius was probably an exaggerated character, his moral depravity creates a sharp contrast to the sterling warrior Arthur who fought the twelve battles. Vortigern exhibited no heroism whatsoever. Such a personality would not be a likely basis for the grand legends which were later built around Arthur.

Bede's account of the Picts and Saxons at the time of the rebellion differed somewhat from Gildas's. Bede wrote "then all of a sudden the Angles made an alliance with the Picts, whom by this time they had driven some distance away, and began to turn their arms against their allies." [59] This certainly puts a new spin on the situation! The combined assault of Picts from the north and Saxons from the south makes sense of the twelve battlesites. It also liberates Arthur from an exclusively mid-fifth century existence, which is irreconcilable with the dates in the *Annales Cambriae*.

Why didn't Gildas mention this alliance between the enemies of the Britons? Bede was a careful historian. Gildas was not. Gildas, when speaking of the Picts and Scots, complained bitterly at the bloodshed and devastation they caused, but he never described them in the foully superlative

terms he applied to the Saxons. Gildas's prejudice may have blinded him to the significance of the alliance. For this reason, in combination with his demonstrated disdain of detail, Gildas did not record this fact.

The *Historia Brittonum* contains two more passages which help clarify the identity of Arthur. The first also sheds some light on the mysterious civil strife to which Gildas referred. Nennius wrote: "Vortigern . . . reigned in Britain. In his time [he] had cause to dread, not only from . . . Scots and Picts, but also from the Romans, and [his] apprehensions of Ambrosius." [60] Since no Roman attacks on Britain appear in any of the old histories of the island, and since Gildas made it a point to say that Ambrosius was the last Roman, it is logical to assume that the "Romans" whom Vortigern feared were Romanized Britons. The civil strife was apparently between Vortigern, perhaps leading Britons glad to be free of Roman rule, and Ambrosius, the son of a highly ranked Roman family. Furthermore, as the Roman origin of his name implies, Arthur would probably have fought on the side of the Romanized Britons.

The second passage, a lead-up to the twelve battles, described how "warlike Arthur fought against [the enemies] along with the soldiers of Britain and the kings, [though] there were many more noble than himself, yet he it was who on twelve occasions was leader of war." [61] This may explain why Gildas called Ambrosius the last Roman. Gildas made special note of the fact that the parents of Ambrosius had "worn the purple," implying they were of very high status. Since Arthur was less noble than those he commanded, Gildas may not have seen fit to identify him as a "Roman." The puzzle of Arthur's identity becomes a bit clearer.

One problem remains. How can the dates in the *Annales Cambriae* be reconciled? Bede, remember, interpreted the confusing passage in the *De Excidio* to mean that Badon occurred forty-four years after the arrival of the Saxons in Britain. [62] Also remember that for a while the Saxons were content to stay on the tiny island of Thanet, which could scarcely qualify as threatening to the Britons. Perhaps the arrival of the Saxons in Britain was a reference to their revolt and subsequent surge into greater Britain, not simply the year they landed and were settled. [63] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* cited a series of British-Saxon conflicts between 455, when the Britons are said to have abandoned Kent, and 519. Kent is peninsular, and its taking may not have caused alarm. An entry for 473, however, said the Saxons "fought against the Britons and captured countless spoils and the Britons fled from the English like fire." [64] If this date was used as the *adventus Saxonum* by which Bede's copy of the *De Excidio* dated the siege of Badon, then Badon occurred in 517, which agrees with the *Annales Cambriae*. [65]

What of Ambrosius? The date of Ambrosius's ascent to power must have been near the fall of Vortigern and the Saxon revolt. In the *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius told of Vortimer, son of Vortigern, and his efforts against the Saxons after their rebellion. Vortimer's actions imply that Vortigern was no longer in control, as his policy had always been to appease Hengest and Horsa. In Vortimer's second battle with the Saxons, Horsa died. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* dated the death of Horsa at 455. This is the earliest date for the fall of Vortigern, and the earliest date for Ambrosius to have emerged as leader. The *Annales Cambriae* mention Ambrosius only once, in the entry for year 467, when he fought Vitalinus in the battle of Wallop. Given the nature of the *Annales*, this date may be treated as the latest possible date for the ascent of Ambrosius.

It may be supposed, then, that Ambrosius Aurelianus came to power in Britain *circa* 460, as a successor of Vortigern and possibly as the victor of a civil war. He fought against the Saxons and limited their inland advance. [66] As a Roman, beset on the north and the south by the Saxon-Pictish alliance, he may have assigned his generals to posts similar to the Roman offices of *comes* and *dux*. Such an officer was Arthur.

If the *Annales Cambriae* is accurate, Arthur died in 537. He was therefore not an exact contemporary of Ambrosius; he may have been his successor. Arthur mab Uter, the terrible

warrior, twelve times chosen by kings to command, was not himself a king. He was an aggressive commander of Romano-British descent whose military campaigns earned him the status of hero. Whether he was actually commander at Badon is unknown, though history (such as it was) has remembered him thus. This memory persisted through Britain's darkest age, after which Arthur was romanticized into the larger-than-life symbol of virtuous leadership with which we associate him today.

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## Notes

- [1] "Scots" here refers to the invading peoples of Ireland before their settlement in northern Britain, now called Scotland.
- [2] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.14, trans. A. W. Wade-Evans, *The Emergence of England and Wales* (Cambridge, 1959), 117-138.
- [3] The third consulship of Aetius was between 446 and 454.
- [4] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.21.
- [5] Henry Marsh, *Dark Age Britain* (Hamden [CN], 1970), 31. Blame is traditionally heaped upon Vortigern for his mistake in hiring the Saxon mercenaries. Marsh points out that he was only following the Roman practice of enlisting ethnic populations as auxiliary units of the army.
- [6] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.23. The term "Saxons," here and throughout, is used generically to describe all Teutonic peoples who came to Britain from Saxony and the Low Countries in the fifth century, i.e. Saxons, Angles, Frisians, and Jutes.
- [7] Due to falling ocean levels, Thanet, once located off the extreme eastern tip of Kent, is no longer an island.
- [8] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.25.
- [9] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.26.
- [10] Geoffrey Ashe, "The Arthurian Fact," in *The Quest for Arthur's Britain*, ed. Geoffrey Ashe (New York, 1968), 63. Ashe proposed that Arthur's pillages were appropriations to support the military, and offered the case of Charles Martel as support for his hypothesis. In the eighth century Martel requisitioned church property to finance the defense of France against the Arabs. Though he saved Christendom in the West, monkish authors portrayed him as a villain.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 64.
- [12] Nennius *Historia Brittonum* 2.3, trans. J. A. Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles* (London, 1900), 383-416.
- [13] Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 - c. 1307* (London, 1974[?]), 10.
- [14] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.26.
- [15] E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (Cambridge, 1964), 4.
- [16] This interpretation assumes inaccuracies in the *De Excidio* manuscripts which survive today and reinterprets the date of the arrival of the Saxons. See Beram Saklatvala, *Arthur: Roman Britain's Last Champion* (Newton Abbot [Great Britain], 1967), 117-122.
- [17] Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 5.
- [18] See pages 25-26 below.
- [19] Unfortunately, the death of Ambrosius is not recorded.
- [20] Robert Huntington Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles* (New York, 1966), 4.
- [21] Wade-Evans, *Emergence of England*, 31-37.
- [22] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does, by omission, record a period of no major military or territorial gains between 519 and 552. This suggests the Saxon advance was halted as Gildas said. Furthermore, the Saxon chronicle did not record defeats.
- [23] Nennius *Historia Brittonum* 3.56. In the Vatican copy of the *Historia Brittonum*, which postdates the standard Harleian manuscript cited above, the eleventh battle occurred on the hill of Breguoin, or Bregion.
- [24] P. K. Johnstone, "The Victories of Arthur," *Notes and Queries* (June, 1934): 382.
- [25] *Ibid.* The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records a battle near Somerset or Dorset in 658, which "put the Britons to flight." See Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker (New Brunswick [NJ], 1961), 21.
- [26] Johnstone warns against this obvious connection. He points out that Badbury, originally Badda's Fort, is a Saxon name, and that there is no reason to assume the conquerors would keep the British name. See Johnstone, "The Victories of Arthur," 382.
- [27] R. G. Collingwood, "Arthur's Battles," *Antiquity* III (1929): 292-297.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 294.
- [29] *Ibid.*, 294-295.
- [30] Nor has anyone else adequately identified the Bassas.
- [31] P. K. Johnstone, "The Victories of Arthur," 381-382, disputed this thesis and claimed he could find no support for the assumption that "Celidon" was applied to forests generally.
- [32] Collingwood, "Arthur's Battles," 295.
- [33] The Vatican manuscript has glossed in, after ninth battle at the city of the Legion [*sic*], the phrase "which in British is called Cair Lion." See Wade-Evans, *Emergence of England*, 71.
- [34] Collingwood, "Arthur's Battles," 295.
- [35] *Ibid.*, 296.
- [36] *Ibid.*
- [37] From *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. See discussion of Johnstone's Tribruit and Agned, page 15 below.
- [38] Thus is the theory of P. K. Johnstone, "The Victories of Arthur," 381-382.
- [39] Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, 59.
- [40] P.K. Johnstone, "The Victories of Arthur," 382.
- [41] *Ibid.*
- [42] *Ibid.*
- [43] *Ibid.*
- [44] Rachel Bromwich, "Scotland and the Arthurian Legend," *Bibliographic Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* 15 (1963): 93.
- [45] O. G. S. Crawford, "Arthur and his Battles," *Antiquity* 9 (1935): 280.
- [46] Kemp Malone, "The Historicity of Arthur," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 23 (1924): 478.
- [47] *Ibid.*
- [48] Peter Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 333, 393.
- [49] John Rhys, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford, 1981), 7.
- [50] Kemp Malone, "Artorius," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 23 (1924): 372.
- [51] A. W. Wade-Evans, "Arthur and Octa," *Notes and Queries* (27 November, 1948), 508-509. Wade-Evans rejected the notion of Arthur as *dux Britanniarum*, suggesting instead that he was *comes Brittaniae*. The roving commission would help explain the wide dispersion of the twelve battles attributed to Arthur. Wade-Evans also speculated that Arthur's southern counterpart, the *comes littoris Saxonici*, was none other than Hengest.
- [52] Gildas *De Excidio* 2.20-21.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 133.

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, 8. There is much scholarly agreement on this point.

[56] Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material*, 89. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth translated it instead as "son of Uter," the more obvious, out-of-context meaning. From this error came Uther Pendragon, father of Arthur in Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britannie* and all romances which followed.

[57] Malone, "The Historicity of Arthur," 480-481.

[58] Vortigern's incestuous relationship with his daughter produced a son, Faustus. This forms an interesting parallel to a later story of Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*, ca. 1136. In it Arthur is bewitched into having sex with his half-sister, Morgause. This union produced Modred (also Mordred, Medraut) who would later, through treachery, kill Arthur.

[59] Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, 1.15, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Baltimore, 1968).

[60] Nennius *Historia Brittonum* 3.31.

[61] Nennius *Historia Brittonum* (Vatican MS.) 3.56.

[62] Bede *History of the English Church and People* 1.16.

[63] Saklatvala, *Britain's Last Champion*, 119.

[64] Whitelock, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 10.

[65] Saklatvala, *Britain's Last Champion*, 119.

[66] The Saxon victories recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* during this time are largely confined to coastal areas.

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