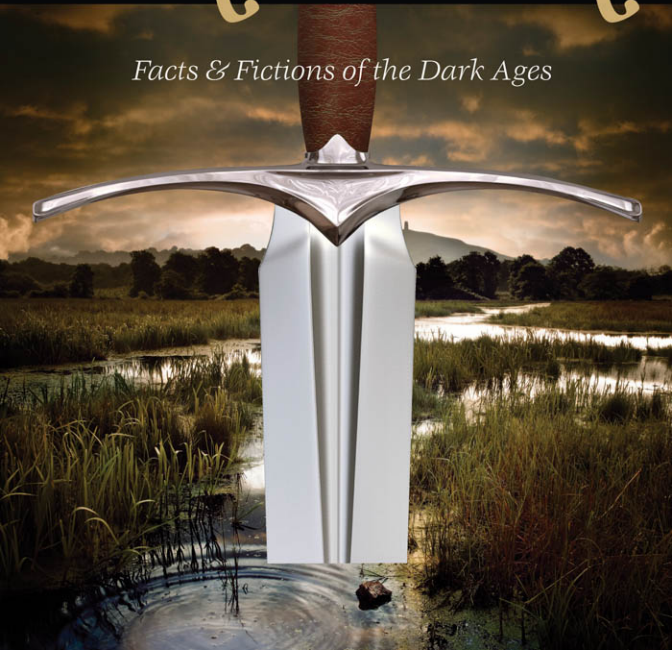


GUY HALSALL

WORLDS of ARTHUR

Facts & Fictions of the Dark Ages



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WORLDS of
ARTHUR

Facts & Fictions of the Dark Ages



GUY HALSALL

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In Memoriam
Philip Arthur Rahtz
(1921–2011)

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PREFACE

It is undeniably ironic that, if asked to name a British medieval king, the so-called ‘man in the street’ will probably come up with one who may well never have existed, or at least one about whom it is impossible to know anything. Yet ‘King Arthur’ continues to excite fascination. Again ironically, it is the supposed ‘Arthur of History’ rather than the ‘Arthur of Legend’ (about whom one can actually say far more) who inspires this interest.

This volume was conceived on a TGV between Montbard and Paris on 28 September 2009. I was reading the latest populist Arthurian history to hit the shelves. Positive reviews in war-gaming magazines suggested that it presented a plausible, scholarly case. It didn’t, and this annoyed me. Almost every bookshop in the UK has at least half a shelf of this sort of book about ‘King Arthur’. Written by amateur enthusiasts, each reveals a different ‘truth’ about the lost king of the Britons. All are mutually incompatible but usually based in whole or part upon the same evidence. Each author fanatically believes his version (and the author is usually a he) to be *the* true story, hushed up by horrid academics or by political conspiracies (usually by the English) or sometimes his rivals. Obviously they can’t all be right. In fact none of them is, because, as this book will make clear, none of them *can* be. Arthur, if he existed—and he *might* have done—is irretrievably lost.

Such books sell, no doubt. Interest in ‘King Arthur’ is enormous. Yet they sell not because the ‘interested layman’ necessarily has a vested interest in the argument that King Arthur was Scottish,

Cornish, Welsh, or from Warwickshire or even, I suspect, in whether or not he existed. They sell because people believe the misleading claims of these books' covers, to reveal the 'truth' or unlock the 'secret'. In other words, they want to know. I could decry the cynicism of publishers who profit from this audience's sincere but ill-informed desire for knowledge and from these authors' dishonesty but I am more troubled by the inactivity of my own, historical profession. Why has it done nothing to help this interested lay audience, by propagating the results of the specialist work that disproves any and all claims to have discovered the real Arthur? Why has it not at least made available some insight into how to judge, and see through, the siren claims of the pseudo-histories, as I will refer to non-academic treatments of this period that ignore recent scholarly analyses?

This book responds to this demand. Before going any further, I should confess to being what might be termed a romantic Arthurian agnostic. That is to say that I wish that Arthur *had* existed but that I must admit that there is no evidence—at any rate none admissible in any serious 'court of history'—that he ever did so. Simultaneously, though, I also concede that it is impossible to prove for sure that he *didn't* exist, that one cannot demonstrate for sure that there is no 'fire' behind the 'smoke' of later myth and legend. If that sounds too wishy-washy, I will argue that this is the *only* attitude that can seriously be held concerning the historicity of the 'once and future king'.

The book is divided into four parts, or 'Worlds' of Arthur. Parts I–III serve as a guide to *why* we do not know anything about Arthur, and to *why* it is impossible to know whether he existed or not. They outline the available evidence and how it has been used and misused. But they are also an introduction to what we *can suggest*, at least, about the world in which Arthur is usually supposed to have lived, that darkest era of the so-called Dark Ages between the fizzling out of Roman imperial rule and the arrival of a different kind of Roman authority, with St Augustine's mission to Kent in 597. These parts of

this book explain why you should not waste money on any of the numerous volumes claiming to have ‘solved the riddle’ of Arthur or which include phrases like ‘the true story’ or ‘the secret revealed’ in their titles.

Part I deals with ‘Old Worlds’, the traditional ideas about what became of Britain after the Roman Empire. Here we will meet all the characters, places, and events of the familiar stories about the world of Arthur. We will encounter the early medieval sources for these stories and the main forms of archaeological evidence that were employed to back them up. This, essentially, remains the ‘world of Arthur’ encountered in modern ‘pseudo-histories’. The second part concerns ‘present worlds’. Here I set out how scholars have reassessed the written and archaeological evidence for fifth- and sixth-century Britain, and how specialist academic circles view this period today. We will see that the comforting, familiar story told in Part I can no longer be relied upon. As well as looking at how the written sources have been revealed to be entirely untrustworthy, Part II shows the ways in which excavated data have been reconsidered and are (sometimes at least) used in somewhat different ways from those that were common in the nineteenth and first three quarters of the twentieth centuries. By the end of this part, you will see that in 2012, in many ways, we know far *less* about fifth- and sixth-century British history than we did in 1975. The third part, ‘Mad Worlds’, rounds off the survey of the current state of play by taking you through some common arguments presented in the ‘pseudo-histories’ to try and avoid the lessons of modern scholarly criticism. It also contains a not-entirely-serious look at some misleading ‘red herrings’ about ‘the historical Arthur’.

These first three parts, or ‘worlds’, will give you a grounding in the evidence available for the study of post-imperial Britain, its problems, and how scholars treat it today. They provide a ‘tool kit’ to help the interested reader evaluate the claims made in the ‘pseudo-histories’.

By contrast, in Part IV, 'New Worlds?', I set out my own reading of the evidence. It doesn't claim to represent the truth; it is up front about being a personal view, not currently held by many people, and frequently controversial. It contains precious few 'facts', being about frameworks and interpretations. I hope that this part of the book will be of interest and value to specialists but I firmly believe, too, that new scholarly ideas should be available to the interested audience outside academia. That audience should not have to wait years for those ideas to be accepted, to become the consensus view, and then be filtered down through populist volumes and TV programmes. By the time that happens, the academic view has usually moved on. Therefore, although of necessity quite technical in places, I have endeavoured to make it as accessible as possible to an intelligent non-specialist.

Part IV builds upon the current scholarly consensus in many ways but in others points out some shortcomings of academic interpretations. While very high-quality work has been done on excavating, recording, and analysing the sites and artefacts from this period (we must be clear about that), the readings of this material suffer from several problems. One is a purely British—indeed usually a purely *English*—outlook; we will see that Britain in this period cannot be understood outside its broader European context. Another, less common but persisting nevertheless, is the artificial division between Roman archaeology, which ceases around 400, and Anglo-Saxon archaeology, which starts in the fifth century. A full understanding of the world of 'King Arthur' requires us to look at developments across this divide. Third, possibly the most serious problem of all, is a view of the era which stems ultimately from the legacy of the written sources discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 and which conceives of it in 'binary' terms. That is to say that it sees it simply as a straightforward, two-sided ethnic struggle between *the* Britons and *the* Saxons. My previous research has focused on mainland European history and

PREFACE

archaeology between the fourth century and the seventh. This allows me to stand outside these debates and look at them in a different and, I hope, more helpful perspective. I will suggest some—quite radical—directions for future, critically informed work that might, in turn, help us build a new and different ‘World of Arthur’.

I have not wanted to bog the non-specialist reader down with footnotes; academic readers will usually know where the information comes from anyway. Instead, I have included a long, chapter-by-chapter essay on further reading, and a bibliography. The further reading essay suggests background reading as well as referring to the technical pieces whence I have taken specific points and arguments. Debts of this kind are acknowledged here rather than in the usual scholarly apparatus.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

That leaves more general debts. In some ways this book is ‘my own work’ to a greater degree than anything I have written before. Nonetheless, Parts I and II are entirely based upon the work of previous scholars—especially the linguists, the editors, the excavators, and the finds-analysts—who have mastered the era and created the picture of it that we have today, through various technical skills which I lack completely. I cannot do other than express my enormous debt to the work they have produced. Parts I and II do no more than set out the results of all this work for the interested layman or newcomer to the period, and perhaps for specialists in one area who are unfamiliar with the others. The critical lessons of Part III are similarly founded upon what I have learnt from these specialists. Part IV might then seem to turn round and bite the hand that fed me. In some ways this is probably right. However, its bed-rock remains the work of all the specialists just mentioned, and the debt of gratitude remains. I hope this is clear.

I owe most to the Leverhulme Trust, which awarded me a Major Research Fellowship for the years 2009–12 to study the Transformations of the Year 600. The British aspects of this period of profound change across western Europe are much referred to in this book. I am very grateful, too, to Richard Burgess, Kate Forsyth, James Fraser, Fraser Hunter, Charles Insley, Dave Petts, Tom Pickles, Mark Whyman, and Alex Woolf for help with specific areas or research. Charles, Tom, Mark, and Alex read the whole volume in one version or another and provided enormously helpful feedback. Chris Wickham made an important

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suggestion for Chapter 11 and the Oxford University Press's anonymous readers made a wide range of uniformly useful comments, not least about the book's structure. Luciana O'Flaherty at OUP encouraged me to write a different (and better) book than the one I originally proposed and was continuously enthusiastic about the project thereafter. My thanks also go to all the people who contributed to discussions about particular ideas or sections of the book on the 'After Rome' *Yahoo!* Group and my blog (600transformer.blogspot.com). In particular, my ideas about language change and Anglo-Saxon expansion from the western edge of the villa-zone come directly from a conversation with Stephen Brohan (who also carried out some sterling proofreading). My family and friends always deserve my thanks. So, as ever, does Emma Campbell. In another year, this would have been her book, written (for once) about a topic in which she has a personal interest.

Obviously I owe a huge debt of thanks to the people who taught me early medieval British history and archaeology as an undergraduate: Edward James, Tania Dickinson, Harold Mytum, and Steve Roskams. Above all, though, I thank Philip Rahtz, who passed away while I was writing this volume. I met Philip on the first dig I attended and he was instrumental in my decision to study history and archaeology at York, one I have never regretted. He was a hugely charismatic teacher and a great encouragement in my postgraduate days. I don't know that he would have agreed with, or even liked, everything in this book, but he would have given the ideas space. Philip always had space for ideas; it was one of his many qualities. For what I, personally, and post-imperial (especially 'sub-Roman') British archaeology, in general, owe him, I dedicate this book to Philip's memory with much affection and gratitude.

Half handbook or introduction for the student, non-specialist, or interested layman, and half controversial academic essay, this book will doubtless be seen by many as neither fish nor fowl. That is fair enough. Nevertheless, most animals are neither fish nor fowl and many, I am reliably informed, are quite tasty.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i> .
BAR(B)	British Archaeological Reports (British Series).
BAR(I)	British Archaeological Reports (International Series [originally ‘Supplementary Series’]).
BBCS	<i>Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies</i>
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
EME	<i>Early Medieval Europe</i>
HB	<i>Historia Brittonum</i> (‘Nennius’)
HE	Bede, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
JRGZM	<i>Jahrbuch des römisch-germanisches Zentralmuseums Mainz</i>
MGH AA CM	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi</i> vol.9, <i>Chronica Minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII</i> vol. i, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin, 1892).
NCMH 1	<i>The New Cambridge Medieval History, i c.500–c.700</i> , ed. P. Fouracre (Cambridge, 2005).
NMS	<i>Nottingham Medieval Studies</i>
P&P	<i>Past & Present</i>
PPAS	<i>Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries for Scotland</i>
SzSf	<i>Studien zur Sachsenforschung</i>
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>

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PART I
OLD WORLDS



It's all true, or it ought to be,
and more and better besides

WINSTON CHURCHILL

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I

The Story of 'King Arthur'



The 'Arthur story' begins with certainty in the early ninth century. An author writing in Wales, and often known (possibly wrongly) as Nennius, compiled a *History of the Britons* (*Historia Brittonum*). In this jumbled-looking history, which even refers to itself as a 'heap', are included two passages about somebody called Arthur. One of these is better known than the other. The well-known passage is often referred to as the 'Battle-List' of Arthur: a sequence of twelve battles in which this Arthur, described as 'leader of battles' (*dux bellorum*), laid low his enemies. The author evidently places these battles during the fifth or sixth centuries, during the Anglo-Saxon (or English) settlement of Britain. We will return to this list in more detail, as it provides the basis for most modern pseudo-histories of 'King Arthur'. The second Arthurian passage in the *History of the Britons* is less well known simply because it is more inconvenient to fans of 'the historical Arthur'. In this (jointly with the Battle-List) earliest datable reference to Arthur, he is already a legendary figure. The passage alludes to a tale about a great boar-hunt, seemingly a story told in a central medieval Welsh Arthurian romance, saying where in the hills

around Builth Wells you can see the footprint of Arthur's giant hound embedded in a stone in a cairn. This can never be stolen but always miraculously returns. In Eryng, says the *History*, you can also see the grave of Amr, son of 'Arthur the soldier' and slain by Arthur himself. This is never the same length twice, when you measure it. There's no convincing reason to suppose that the two passages refer to different Arthurs. Thus in Gwynedd around 830, some people had heard about an at least semi-legendary character called Arthur.

Possibly around the same time (possibly earlier, possibly later; it's impossible to say for sure) a poet (maybe writing in the same part of the world as the *History of the Britons* was written) composed an elegy about the massacre of a noble, heroic British warband at a place called Catraeth (usually thought to be Catterick in North Yorkshire). In this poem, *Y Gododdin*, the poet (who claimed the name of Aneirin, a poet mentioned in the *History of the Britons*) described the martial feats of one warrior but said that nevertheless 'he was not Arthur'. Sadly our poet, whoever he was, whenever he was writing, does not pause to tell us who *was* Arthur but we can at least say that, like his possible contemporary (and indeed possible neighbour), the author of the *History*, he had heard of someone by that name. It does not, let me stress, imply anything about whether this character was historical or legendary.

The Arthurian story resumes in the tenth century when another anonymous scribe compiled a series of annals (a list of years next to which was written memorable events that happened during them) known to historians as the *Annales Cambriae* (*The Welsh Annals*). Here, two entries give our Arthur character a very precisely dated existence. Under the year 516, we read that Arthur won the battle of Badon, carrying the image of Jesus Christ 'on his shoulders', as he did so. Then, under 537, an entry mentions the 'battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut [eventually to become better-known as Mordred] perished'. This information is far less precise than many would like.

This, disappointingly, is *the sum total* of all the evidence for 'King Arthur' that survives from within five centuries of his supposed existence around AD 500. We might reasonably see this historical silence as the lid on a bubbling kettle of popular tales or legends. The meagre surviving traces represent small puffs of vapour let out when the lid was briefly forced up by the steam, before plopping firmly back down again. It must be said, though, that one might also link these stories together, to some extent, through a purely textual relationship. That is to say that the author of the *Welsh Annals* had read the *History of the Britons*, that the author of the *History of the Britons* had read 'Aneirin's' poetry (or vice versa), which the Welsh annalist might also have read, and that one or more of these writers had read the work of a certain Gildas, whom we shall encounter in the next chapter. No kettle required. Within 200 years of the compilation of the *Welsh Annals*, however, the lid of our 'kettle' had blown right off. Mixing our metaphors somewhat, the steam had turned into a veritable geyser.

Probably behind this explosion was a character called Geoffrey of Monmouth who, in the earlier twelfth century, wrote a *History of the Kings of Britain*, including a long and extraordinarily detailed history of King Arthur and his many exploits. Geoffrey claimed to have based this on a 'very ancient book', whose title or author he omitted to name. It is hardly an unknown strategy among authors who wish to ascribe some form of authority to their own invention, but it has served as a convenient 'get-out clause' for the authors of modern pseudo-history who want to flesh out the details of their stories about Arthur. Even some medieval people thought that Geoffrey was making it up. One, William of Newburgh, wrote:

it is quite clear that everything this man wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others, either from an inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons.

But the thing was, and this cannot be emphasized too strongly (even if modern historians sometimes forget it), medieval people did not see the same distinction as their modern descendants do between legend and history. The point of 'history' was moral teaching, not facts about 'how it really was'.

Be that as it may, from about Geoffrey's day onwards the legend of Arthur blooms into myriad tales in numerous different languages, principally French (including Anglo-Norman), and by 1300 or thereabouts all the well-known characters, places, and objects have made their appearance: Lancelot, Guinevere, Galahad, and Gawain, plus Merlin, Excalibur, the Lady in the Lake, the Sword in the Stone, and Camelot, Arthur's capital. These stories, and the characters and events in them, collectively form what was known as 'The Matter of Britain'. A 'matter' in this sense was a specific body of material upon which writers and storytellers could draw. The 'Matter of France', for example, constituted the stories about Charlemagne and the heroic knights of his court (Roland, Olivier, and the rest). The Welsh version of the Arthurian legend also appears in written form from about 1100 onwards, though the relationship between this corpus of stories and the French one is difficult to unravel. Certainly it is by no means certain that the French Arthur derives entirely from the Welsh, rather than vice versa. In the late twelfth century, the monks of Glastonbury Abbey even claimed to have discovered King Arthur's grave in their monastery. If not simply wanting to 'cash in' on the popularity of the Arthur story, it is possible that, as has been suggested, they (perhaps on the instructions of their king, Henry II) wanted to prove to his Welsh enemies that Arthur really was dead and gone and therefore unlikely to come back from his rest to clear the English out of Britain any time soon. The development of this legendary material is not part of this book's remit. There is an enormous body of scholarly literature analysing all aspects of 'the Arthur of Legend' from a wide variety of literary and historical perspectives. For now, all that needs to be

stressed is the fact that this legend all comes six centuries, or more, later than the 'historical' Arthur.

After the blossoming of Arthurian romance in the Victorian period, the historical and legendary Arthurs began to separate from each other, unsurprisingly, when the discipline of history established itself as a scientific exercise with its own academic practices, distinct from philosophy or literature. Over time, attitudes towards the claim that there was a figure of this name, alive around 500, divided into two camps. On one side were the Arthurian hard-liners who claimed that the evidence was late and legendary and therefore inadmissible, and thus consigned Arthur wholly to the sphere of legend (by now separable from History), and on the other were the believers in 'no smoke without fire', happy to accept that the Arthur attested in the three first-millennium sources mentioned above had a real existence, giving rise to these tales. Even if most, if not all, cheerily dismissed the legendary writings from Geoffrey of Monmouth onwards, some attempted to weave into the fragmentary first-millennium traces of Arthur the testimony of other indubitably genuine early medieval sources and archaeology. All of these forms of evidence are discussed in the following chapters.

The confrontation came to a head after the publication of John Morris's *The Age of Arthur* in 1973. Morris—who was a very learned and respected scholar, with an awareness of an enormous range of evidence, written and archaeological—claimed that through the consultation of a wide array of neglected 'Celtic' written sources, notably saints' lives, a detailed narrative history of fifth- and sixth-century Britain was possible. All of a sudden this Dark Age was apparently bathed in light. Morris sketched an account of a unified post-imperial British state caught up, first, in a struggle between Vortigern and Ambrosius Aurelianus 'the elder' (for, according to Morris, there were two people by this name—I will introduce these characters more fully in the next chapter), and then subject to Saxon

and other barbarian attacks. A revival led by Ambrosius 'the younger' in the later fifth century engendered a period of British triumph under the 'Emperor Arthur' around AD 500, culminating in his great victory at Mount Badon. This stopped the Saxon advance in its tracks for over a generation, during which the British lapsed into civil war and Arthur's 'Empire' fell apart. In the later sixth century, the English resumed their advance against the divided British 'successor states' and by the mid-seventh century the picture of an English lowland and a Welsh highland zone was established.

There are essentially two things that you need to know about Morris's *The Age of Arthur*: one is that it is a marvellous, inspiring read; the other is that very little of it can be relied upon. I sometimes wonder if it wasn't one of the greatest historical hoaxes ever perpetrated. If Morris's intention was to be deliberately provocative and, by proposing an intentionally outrageous theory of post-imperial British history, make people think hard about the problems of the sources for this period, he certainly succeeded. The book received a barrage of criticism, most notably by David Dumville (then of Cambridge University's department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic), who contributed a devastating critique to the journal *History* in 1977 (in an ideal world it would be given away free with every copy of *The Age of Arthur*). Dumville showed that the 'Celtic' sources used by Morris were without evidential value for the fifth and sixth centuries; we will look at why in Chapter 4. A more generous, but still irresistible, discussion of Morris's evidence and interpretation was written by a prominent Oxford Anglo-Saxon historian, James Campbell. From 'Celticist' and 'Anglo-Saxonist' perspectives, then, Morris's book was shown to have more holes than a Swiss cheese.

Morris himself was less than up-front about his evidence. *The Age of Arthur* has one of the most labyrinthine referencing systems you will ever encounter, covering Morris's tracks very efficiently and making it difficult to find the sources for his statements. If you persist

you will often find that the evidence cited does not say what he would have us believe it says, or is of extremely dubious worth. Two examples will suffice. In his account of the war (559–60) of the Frankish king Chlothar I against his rebellious son, Chramn, and his Breton allies (*Age of Arthur*, 257–8), Morris plays havoc with the evidence of the contemporary Gaulish bishop-historian Gregory of Tours, reverses events and characters, and uncritically intersperses it with data from late Breton saints' lives. None of this messing about is evident from the text, where it is woven into a seamless narrative. Second, on p. 377 of *The Age of Arthur* you will read how St Finian lost out in a sort of military praying contest to St Columba at the battle of Cuil Dreimhne. If you can track it down, the source for this 'pray-off' is not even vaguely contemporary source but a sixteenth-century collection of O'Neill folklore. In some ways, Morris was the Geoffrey of Monmouth *de nos jours*.

And, like Geoffrey of Monmouth's, Morris's work has mostly remained untouched by the torrent of scholarly critique. It continues in print, available in bookshops across the land, providing the inspiration for droves of writers penning their own half-baked theories about who, where, and when 'King Arthur' was. Meanwhile, though, among the academic community, the sceptics have decisively carried the day. No sane scholar will now argue that there is definitely a 'King Arthur' figure in fifth- or sixth-century history about whom anything solid can be said, so professional historians now tend to leave the issue alone. The old opposition between sceptics and believers has thus, since the debate on Morris's book, been transformed into a division between qualified academic students of the period and enthusiastic, wilfully naive (at best) amateurs respectively. The academics, though, have not attempted to take their argument outside their universities, abandoning the battlefield to the amateurs. Consequently, works like Morris's and his less scholarly imitators continue to lead astray thousands of people with a genuine interest in that mysterious,

romantic post-imperial era of British history. This book aims to help this interested audience by acting as a corrective to the shelves of pseudo-historical 'Arthurian' nonsense available in practically every bookshop in Britain.

If you are a firm believer that King Arthur lived, and that he lived in Cornwall, or Scotland, or Warwickshire, or wherever, or even if you want me to tell you—yes or no—whether or not 'King Arthur' ever lived, you will find yourself gnashing your teeth in Part II. If you know anything at all about fifth- and sixth-century Britain you will probably find yourself gnashing your teeth at at least some of Part IV. If you have written one of the pseudo-histories you will find you have little by way of teeth left to grind by the end of Part III. I do not set out simply to shock (or create work for dentists). I hope that the summaries of information and argument set out in Parts I and II are reliable and believe that the case presented in Part IV is better than its currently available alternatives. That does not necessarily make it 'right'. Marc Bloch, perhaps the greatest historian of the twentieth century, once said that right answers were less important than the right questions. The questions asked of the written evidence pertaining to this period were for a long time the wrong ones, as is now generally accepted. I contend that many questions posed of the excavated data continue to be fundamentally mistaken. We will only progress in understanding this fascinating period when that situation changes. This book, then, is principally about asking questions, ones best posed from a vantage point that sees more than just the British 'World of Arthur'. The study of King Arthur has been insular for too long.

2

The Matter of Arthur

The Traditional Narrative



Prelude: the ending of Roman Britain

In another ironic twist, the end of imperial authority in Britain is better documented than most periods of Roman rule there. In mid-406, the army in Britain raised to the throne three individuals in rapid succession, usurping the authority of the feeble Emperor Honorius. Two, Marcus and Gratian (the latter at least a civilian), were soon assassinated. The third, a soldier, took (presumably) the most effective elements of the British garrison to Gaul to make good his claim to the throne as 'Constantine III'. This was hardly the first time this had happened. The British army had raised a usurper emperor in the form of Magnus Maximus, who reigned for five years before being defeated and executed by Honorius' father, Theodosius I, in 388. Most famously and successfully, the great Constantine I had been proclaimed emperor in York, and thus had similarly started out as a usurper. This happened exactly 100 years before 'Constantine III's' election, one possible reason for his choice as a candidate; a contemporary writer said they 'took hope from his name'.

Why had the British army taken this well-worn track right now? At about the same time a major barbarian incursion crossed the Rhine into an effectively undefended northern Gaul. It is often said that the Rhine was frozen, allowing the barbarians across, but the earliest source to say so was Edward Gibbon's late eighteenth-century *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*! In Zosimus' *New History* (written c.500 in the eastern Roman Empire), the invasion is assigned to 31 December of the year we know as 406, placing the invasion *after* the British usurpations. However, it is possible that the event occurred on 31 December 405, *before* the elevation of Gratian, Marcus, and Constantine.

Constantine invaded Gaul during 407. He quickly established himself in Gaul, possibly at Lyon, and his authority was accepted in Spain. With much of the West secure, Constantine marched to Trier, his troops apparently penning the barbarian invaders into the far north of Gaul. By 409 he had tightened his control over Spain, defeating a rebellion there by Honorius' relatives, and even claimed that Honorius had granted him the title of consul. Honorius was hard pressed in Italy by Alaric the Goth and a Gothic-backed usurper, and might have needed Constantine's support. Things then started to unravel for Constantine. The barbarians broke out of northern Gaul and stormed southwards, entering Spain in late 409. In Spain itself, Constantine's general Gerontius rebelled and proclaimed his own usurper emperor, Maximus. Constans, Constantine's son and *caesar* (deputy emperor), fled back to Gaul.

In 410 Constantine 'III' planned a two-pronged counter-offensive. While Constans was sent with another force to retake Spain, he invaded Italy—whether to support Honorius against Alaric or to take advantage of Honorius' plight to seize the western Empire's last remaining components is unknown. It all ended in failure. Constantine's army soon returned to Gaul, possibly after being

defeated by Alaric. Constans was hounded back over the Pyrenees by Gerontius and killed at Vienne, south of Lyon. In 411 Emperor Honorius' general Constantius defeated Gerontius, who was by then besieging Constantine 'III' in Arles. Routing a relieving army from the north, Constantius captured Constantine and took him and his other son, Julian, back to Italy, where both were beheaded. Thus ended Constantine's bid for power.

Meanwhile, according to the anonymous *Gallic Chronicle of 452*, Britain was ravaged by the Saxons in 409 or 410. Zosimus says that, after serious barbarian attacks (possibly those mentioned by the *Chronicle of 452*), the Britons took up arms and threw out 'Roman' officials, evidently in 409. They 'installed the government they wanted'. Zosimus also says that Honorius wrote to the cities of *Brittia* (this would be in 410) telling them to look after themselves. It is not certain, it should be said, either that *Brittia* is Britain rather than Bruttium in Italy (which also makes sense in the context of the events of 410) or that Honorius was talking about a high political level of defence.

Post-imperial Britain

After Constantine's defeat, historical darkness descends upon Britain as far as contemporary mainland European sources are concerned. However, the era is described in insular British sources, some of which were mentioned in Chapter 1. The traditional historical narrative is based primarily around four sources: the *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (*On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*), by someone called Gildas, usually believed to have been written around 540; the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written by Bede in 731; the *History of the Britons*, of 828–9, ascribed to a writer called Nennius; and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* written in Wessex from the 880s onwards.

The Pictish wars

The relevant part of Gildas' account falls into a 'Northern Section' and an 'Eastern Section'. The former opens with the legions' departure under the *tyrannus* (tyrant) Magnus Maximus. This can be pinned to 383, the year of Maximus' rebellion. Maximus left Britain to endure Pictish and Scottish attacks. The Britons appealed to Rome and a legion was dispatched, building a defensive turf wall before leaving. This did not protect the Britons so a second appeal was made and another force was sent, this time constructing a stone wall and instructing the Britons about military defence before withdrawing. This also failed to have the desired effects. The barbarians took the north of the island and harried Britain from sea to sea. The fifth-century Gaulish *Life of Germanus of Auxerre* mentions that the saint was sent to Britain to adjudicate between orthodox Catholic Christians and Pelagian heretics (on whom, more later). This took place in 429. Whilst in Britain, the bishop took command of local defence against a combined Pictish–Saxon force. Germanus stationed the British army in ambush on both sides of a valley and when the barbarians appeared they rose up shouting 'Alleluia', at which the enemy—unsurprisingly—fled.

Things were clearly looking bleak when the Britons wrote to Aëtius, imperial military commander in Gaul between the later 420s and 454. Gildas cites a passage from their letter, entitled the 'Groans of the Britons'. Aëtius is described as 'thrice consul' (*ter consulus*). His third consulate took place in 446 and he was murdered in 454, giving a date-bracket for the letter. Aëtius was campaigning in northern Gaul in 448, which might provide a more precise context. Aëtius was told how the Britons were driven into the sea by the barbarians and thrown by the sea back to the barbarians, giving them a choice between drowning and having their throats slit. Nevertheless Aëtius sent no help. Bede later explained that Aëtius had his hands full,

dealing with the Huns. In Britain things went from bad to worse. Famine broke out, and hunger drove some Britons to surrender to the barbarians. Others fled to remote mountains, heaths, and caves. Some, however, fought back until the barbarians were repelled. In Gildas' view, this victory only led to a period of sin and sexual excess.

The coming of the Saxons

Now Gildas' 'Eastern Section' begins, with rumours of impending barbarian attack. A council, under a 'proud tyrant' (*tyrannus superbus*), invited the Saxons to defend Britain. This tyrant is named by Bede and later sources as a certain 'Vurtigernus'—Vortigern. Vortigern's name means something like 'High Ruler' in Old Welsh and it is thought that Gildas' 'Proud Tyrant' was a pun on this. Alternatively, this might not have been his name at all, but his title: 'over-king'. Bede calculated that this 'Coming of the English' took place under Emperors Valentinian and Marcian (450–5); later narratives narrowed this down to 449.

Bede makes significant additions to earlier versions of the story. He says (*HE* 1.15) the Saxons were commanded by two brothers, Hengist and Horsa, and adds a long, interesting passage about the Anglo-Saxons' origins. The newcomers came, he says, from three mighty peoples: the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. From the Saxons, says Bede, are (unsurprisingly) descended the West, East, and South Saxon kingdoms, from the Angles stem the East and Middle Angles, Mercians, and Northumbrians, and from the Jutes originate the people of Kent, the Isle of Wight, and of the Hampshire coast opposite Wight. He says that the scale of migration was such that Angeln, whence came the Angles, was depopulated in his day. Elsewhere (*HE* 5.9), Bede gives a much more varied list of people from whom the Anglo-Saxons descend: Frisians, Rugians, Danes, Huns, Old Saxons, and *Boruhware* (seemingly the Rhineland Frankish Bructuari). Bede provides Hengist

and Horsa's genealogy, saying that they were the 'sons of Wihtgisl, son of Witta, son of Wecta, son of Woden'.

A century after Bede, 'Nennius' added further details. However, his sources led him to date the coming of the Saxons to the year we think of as 428—the author calculates this in three ways (*HB* 31, 66). He gives a more elaborate version of the Hengist and Horsa story. As in Bede's account, Vortigern requests their aid in fighting the Picts and Scots, although (says 'Nennius') he was also afraid of a Roman invasion and of Ambrosius (of whom more shortly). 'Nennius' adds five generations to Bede's genealogy, taking the brothers' descent back to Geta 'who they say was son of god but not the god of gods...but an idol they worshipped'. According to 'Nennius', Vortigern gave the Saxons Thanet. 'Nennius' also provides the earliest version of the story of how the Saxon chief contrived to have Vortigern fall in love with his daughter and exploited his infatuation to persuade him to grant all Kent to the Saxons and lands in northern Britain by the Wall to his kinsmen.

The Saxon war

According to Gildas, once invited in, the Saxons fastened their grip on the east of the island and demanded increased supplies and wages. When the Britons withheld these, the Saxons rebelled and ravaged Britain as far as the (presumably Irish) sea. Great slaughter and the destruction of towns ensued. Again, says Gildas, starvation drove some Britons to surrender while others fled to mountains, forests, and cliffs. Possibly confirming this, the anonymous *Gallic Chronicle of 452* says that in 441/2, the British provinces were subjected to Saxon dominion.

The Britons' foes retreated, though, and the Britons, led by a certain Ambrosius Aurelianus, eventually defeated the Saxons. A war culminated in the siege of Mount Badon. Gildas apparently says that this occurred forty-three years and one month before he was writing, in the year of his birth:

From then on, victory went now to our countrymen, now to their enemies: so that in this people the Lord could make trial (as he tends to) of his latter-day Israel to see whether it loves him or not. This lasted right up to the year of the siege of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. That was the year of my birth; as I know one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already elapsed. (*On the Ruin of Britain*, chapter 26.1)

Gildas also gives us another piece of information relative to his own time of writing, which might help us to date this siege or battle. He says that in his own day Ambrosius Aurelianus' grandsons ruled, and he might imply that Ambrosius won at Mount Badon. If Gildas wrote around 540, as is usually said, then this battle should have taken place within a decade either side of 500. However, in Gildas' view, the result of this victory was the wreck of Britain, civil war, sin, and greed.

'Nennius' details Vortigern's other tribulations, apparently occurring during the wars following the Saxon revolt and before Badon. Vortigern begat a son on his own daughter and was cursed by St Germanus. He fled into Snowdonia and later moved to the north, with his supporters. In Kent, meanwhile, 'Nennius' says Vortigern's son Vortimer shut the Saxons into Thanet three times and won four victories (only three are named). At the second of these, Hengist's brother Horsa and Vortigern's son Pascent were killed. Bede says that, in his day, Horsa's monument could still be seen in Kent. On his deathbed, Vortimer told his men to bury him by the sea because that would prevent the English from ever settling in Britain. Of course, fatally they failed to do this, burying him instead, for reasons best known to themselves, in Lincoln. In Kent, the beleaguered Saxons now tricked Vortigern by convening a peace council where, at a pre-arranged signal, each Saxon guest treacherously stabbed the Briton next to him. Vortigern alone survived and had to ransom himself by granting the Saxons Essex, Sussex, and Middlesex. Hated by all and sundry, Vortigern fled from one place to another, pursued by St Germanus for his incest, until he eventually died.

Regional details of the fighting between Saxons and Britons are added, from a Saxon point of view, by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This adds four battles in Kent: *Ægelesthrep* (455), where Horsa was killed; *Creacanford* (456), where 4,000 Britons fell and the rest were driven in rout back into London, *Wippedesfleot* (465), where no fewer than twelve British chiefs were slain, including the eponymous Wipped; and finally an unnamed battle where Hengist and Æsc his son took countless spoils 'and the Britons fled from the English as from fire'. After completing the description of the conquest of Kent, between 449 and 473, the *Chronicle* relates the coming of the South Saxons. These arrived, like Hengist, in three ships, under Ælle and his three sons, and between 473 and 491 conquered Sussex. After the foundation of Sussex, the *Chronicle* recounts the foundation of the kingdom of Wessex by Cerdic and his son Cynric. It narrates West Saxon history until 593, with three interruptions (under 547, 560, and 591) mentioning the foundation and royal succession of Northumbria.

Bede gives us one further piece of information to set alongside the *Chronicle's* account of the wars. He gives a much-discussed list of seven kings who held *imperium* (overlordship) over the English up to 672 (*HE* 2.5). The first three are Ælle of Sussex, Ceawlin of Wessex, and Æthelberht of Kent, all of whom the *Chronicle* mentions. It has been plausibly suggested that Bede drew the first two of these, who otherwise have no place in his *History*, from a Canterbury source, perhaps a list of kings who ruled over Kent.

Arthur and his battles

It will be glaringly obvious that so far we have had no mention of Arthur. Gildas' silence is intriguing and has engendered much medieval and modern speculation. The great war-leader's absence from the English sources, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Chronicle*, might not be surprising. Either they had no information about him or they

deliberately left him out as an embarrassing 'blip' in their triumphalist English narrative. Thus it might be expected that it is only when we get to 'Nennius' that we hear about Arthur and his wars. 'Nennius' places Arthur's story after the end of his tales about Vortigern. Arthur's battles are recounted in the fifty-sixth chapter of his work. In a book like this, this passage must be quoted in full. Here is my, rather leaden, literal translation:

In that time the Saxons grew in strength to be a multitude and increased in *Britannia*. Hengist, indeed, having died, Ochta his son crossed from the left part¹ of (or to) Britain to the kingdom of the *Cantii*, and from him stem the kings of the *Cantii*. Then, in those days, Arthur fought against them with the kings of the Britons, but he was the leader of battles. The first battle was at the mouth of the river Glein. The second and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth, were on the river that is called Dubglas, and is in the region of *Linnuis*. The sixth battle was on the river that is called Bassas. The seventh was the battle in the Caledonian Forest, that is *Cat Coit Celidon*. The eighth was the battle in [of?] Castell Guinnion, in which Arthur carried the image of the holy Mary, perpetual virgin, on his shoulders and the pagans were turned over in flight on that day, and a great slaughter was made of them through the power of our lord Jesus Christ and through the power of the holy Virgin Mary his mother. The ninth battle happened in the town of the legion. The tenth battle happened on the bank of the river that is called Tribruit. The eleventh battle was made on the hill that is called Agned. The twelfth was the battle of Mount Badon, in which 960 men were overthrown in one day in a single charge by Arthur, and no one laid them low other than him, and in all battles he was seen to be victor. And they [the Saxons], since they were being

¹ The north. 'Nennius' has already said that areas around Hadrian's Wall had been given to Hengist's relatives. If you orient yourself on the east, 'left' would be to the north, 'right' to the south, and these usages seem common in medieval 'Cambro-Latin'. On the other hand, the Romans faced south when swearing oaths, which would make 'the left side' the east. This too would make sense as meaning from across the North Sea.