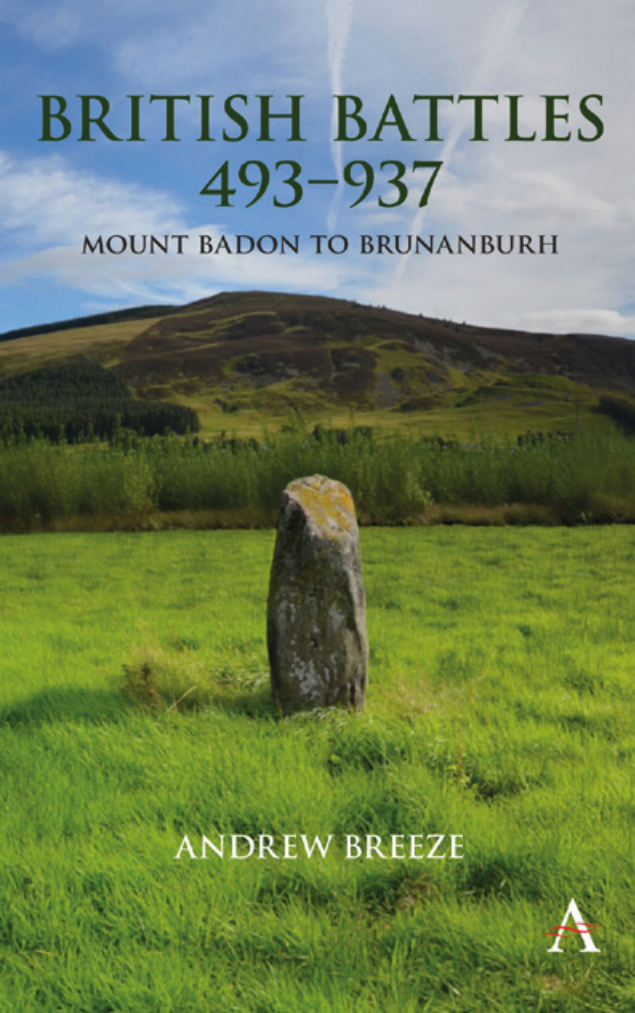
# BRITISH BATTLES 493–937

## MOUNT BADON TO BRUNANBURH



ANDREW BREEZE

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Carrec Legion
Guinnion
Tarras?
Tryfrwyd
'Degsastan
Glein
Douglas
Agued
Brewyn
Celyddon
Tarras?
Heavenfield
Arfderydd
Camlan
Brunanburh
Alluthelia
Gwen Ystrad
Uinued
Hatfield
Chase
Chester
Buttington
Maserfelth
Badon
Hill

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## Mount Badon to Brunanburh

by Andrew Breeze

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To my mother and to the memory of my father

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# INTRODUCTION

This book is about war, and specifically about early battlefields in Britain. Some of its material has appeared in historical journals (as shown in the bibliography); other chapters are previously unpublished. All of them break new ground. They relate, for example, the British victory over West Saxons at Mount 'Badon' in 493 to Braydon in north Wiltshire; the massacre of an allied Scottish-Irish force at 'Degsastan' in 603 to Wester Dawyck, southern Scotland; the Northumbrian defeat at *Maserfelth* in 642 to Forden, near Welshpool; and the English triumph at *Brunanburh* in 937 to Lanchester, County Durham. The traditional locations proposed for these battles (Badbury, Dawston Rigg, Oswestry, Bromborough) can hence be rejected.

If arguments for such places are compelling, there are three main benefits. First, much Anglo-Saxon history can be rewritten. We shall understand better the aims of commanders on both sides and their success (or lack of it). Second is an advance for archaeologists. They need not waste time excavating a site in mid-Wiltshire or the Wirral in a quest for swords and spears, because they would be looking in the wrong place. Third is the demonstration of a method. Analysis of place names in English or Welsh allows emendation of (for example) 'Badon' or 'Degsastan', which make no sense, to names that do make sense and can be found on the map. The technique can be applied to sites other than battlefields. The sixth-century writer Gildas refers to the (fourth-century?) martyrdom of Aaron and Julius at 'Legionum urbs', often taken as Caerleon, in south-east Wales. Yet the form is better emended to *Legorum urbs* or Leicester, more important than Caerleon, and hence a likelier place for persecution of Christians. Again, for St Patrick, who refers to his home at the obscure 'Bannaventa Burniae', it is not difficult to show this (after Ludwig Bieler and the local historian Harry Jelley) as a corruption of *Bannaventa Tabernae* (Bannaventa of the Tavern) and therefore Banwell, Avon. St Patrick would have been a Somerset man, living near the opulence of Roman Bath, but also near a low-lying coast dangerously open to Irish predators.

This does not limit the applications of place names. If *British Battles 493–937* demonstrates their significance for military history, three volumes in

preparation show their uses elsewhere. My 'England's Earliest Woman Writer and Other Studies on Dark Age Christianity' presents new evidence on monastic sites in Celtic Britain and beyond, including a previously unknown school of learning at Old Kea, near Truro. Recorded as a mysterious 'Rosnat', it was an embryo Celtic university, attracting students from sixth-century Ireland and Wales, who there made intensive study of the Bible. 'The Arthur of History and Other Arthurian Studies' sets out the career of Arthur, a Strathclyde general (the 'King Arthur' of legend) killed in 537 at *Camlan* or Castlesteads on Hadrian's Wall (as argued below). It then moves on to Arthurian tradition and the Cheshire magnate Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), author (it seems) of the Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poem's references to Welsh and border places being among the clues for this. Finally, 'Place-Names of Roman Britain: Studies and a Dictionary' will contain new etymologies for ancient toponyms, with those of Cirencester, Doncaster, Kent, London, Manchester, Richborough, Salisbury, Severn, Trent, Wharfe, Wroxeter and York among them. Like the present volume, these books make findings on Britain's early languages widely available, so that much of what is mysterious in Britain's past can be brought to light.

If so, it is in part owing to those who gave assistance over the years by sending information, books, offprints or invitations to publish, and whom I thank here: Rosamund Allen, Martin Aurell, Wayne Barham, Carole Biggam, Tim Clarkson, Iestyn Daniel, Ken Dark, David Dumville, Piero Favero, Marged Haycock, Nicholas Higham, Carole Hough, Christopher Howse, Nicolas Jacobs, Kurt Liebhard, Brian Murdoch, Leonard Neidorf, Michiko Ogura, Donncha Ó hAodha, Brynley F. Roberts, Jane Roberts, Hans Sauer, Tom Shippey, Michael Swanton and Nikolai Tolstoy. I owe them much. But to those mentioned in the dedication to this volume, naturally, I owe far more.

# Chapter 1

# 493: BRITISH TRIUMPH AT MOUNT BADON OR BRAYDON, WILTSHIRE

We begin this chronicle of slaughter and fighting men by discussing a battle in Wiltshire. It is a county which (fortunately) has seen few conflicts, despite its central position. In the spring or summer of 493 it was yet the location of *Mons Badonicus* or Mount Badon, described by the British historian Gildas, writing in 536. Even though this British victory halted Anglo-Saxon conquests for half a century, there has been no agreement on its date or location, despite a hazy belief in the former as between 490 and 520, and in the latter as in north Wiltshire, perhaps near Badbury, south of Swindon. Also unsure is whether the leader of the Britons was Arthur or Ambrosius Aurelianus. If we could be certain on these points, knowledge of Britain's history would progress considerably.

In what follows, six conclusions are offered: (a) Gildas wrote in 536, as argued in 2010 by David Woods of Cork; (b) the Siege of Mount Badon was 43 years earlier, and so in 493; (c) obscure and meaningless 'Badon' is a scribal error, and must be corrected to *Braydon*; (d) the siege was thus at Ringsbury, a hillfort above Braydon Forest, near Swindon; (e) Arthur, a North British warrior killed in 537, had no connection with the events in 493; and (f) the general who defeated a West Saxon army (surely marching on Cirencester) was instead the Ambrosius Aurelianus praised by Gildas. These conclusions have been in print for some years, but remain disputed. Hence this book.

An outline of earlier discussion allows understanding of both the problem and the solutions to it. Statements go back a long way. John Leland (d. 1552) quoted one from the twelfth-century chronicler Ralph of Diceto: 'Gildas Britonum gesta flebili sermone descripsit anno domini DLXXXIII' and thus 'sub Mauricio imperatore'.[1] Maurice was Emperor of Byzantium in 582–602, which is far too late. If, however, we knew Ralph's source, it might be of great value; for emended DXXXVI would put Gildas in 536 and Badon in 493, as maintained here.

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[1] Leland 1774, III, 83.

The difficulties are made clear by Philip Perry (1720–1774), rector of the English College, Valladolid. In a manuscript history (published only recently) he described Gildas as 'born in the year of the Battle of Bannesdowne in 493, forty-four years after the arrival of the Saxons in Britain; or in 520, according to others who place the battle of Bannesdowne to that year', with Perry opting for 493.[2] His choice of 493 can be seen as correct. It thereby contrasts with the vagueness or the misplaced confidence of present-day writers.

In the nineteenth century came progress thanks to an edition of the Welsh annals. The entry for 516 there reads: 'Bellum Badonis, in quo Arthur portavit crucem Domini nostri Jesu Christi tribus diebus et tribus noctibus in humeros suos, et Britones victores fuerint', which (despite the fabulous detail of Arthur's carrying a cross) allows certainty on three things.[3] The Britons triumphed; the form 'Badon', resembling nothing in Celtic, is corrupt; it hence surely derives from Gildas's 'Badonicus', also meaningless and corrupt. Nor can the date 516 be right. It was yet accepted by early historians, declaring how 'the British victory at the Mons Badonicus (AD 516 or 520) stops Saxon progress in this quarter for some fifty years', the 'quarter' being southern England 'to the Avon on the borders of Wilts and Dorset'.[4]

The difficulties as regards 516 were explained by Charles Plummer. Bede gives 449 as the year of *Adventus Saxonum* and Badon as occurring 44 years after that (and so in 493). Plummer, thinking Gildas more likely to be writing in 493 + 44 = 537 than in 516 + 44 = 560, preferred 493 to 516. The double sequence of some 44 years he regarded as 'mere coincidence'.[5] On Badon, Plummer thus chose 493, not 516. Sir John Lloyd further remarked on how 'the battle of Badon Hill, fought about the year 500, was a decisive victory for the Britons, giving them immunity from hostile attack for a generation'; not until '550 or thereabouts' did English attacks on the Britons start again.[6] Hugh Williams also considered Badon as occurring 'shortly before or shortly after 500'.[7] John Lloyd-Jones provided Welsh-language references to Badon, none of them in early sources.[8] That total lack of allusion to a British victory is singular. It implies that the Welsh knew of it almost solely from Gildas. This undermines any link between Badon and Arthur. The battle evidently formed no part of native bardic tradition – remarkable, because it was a

[2] Carrera and Carrera 2009, 146.
[3] Williams ab Ithel 1860, 4.
[4] Haddan and Stubbs 1869–78, I, 43.
[5] Plummer 1896, II, 30–31.
[6] Lloyd 1911, 125, 127.
[7] Williams 1912, 350.
[8] Lloyd-Jones 1931–63, 49.

British triumph; double remarkable, because some will have it that the victorious troops were led by Arthur himself.

Convenient maps for non-archaeologists were supplied by William Rees. The impression is of English settlements clustering around Oxford, against a blank around Cirencester.[9] It may be taken with comments by Kenneth Jackson. He regarded the victory of Badon as 'approximately round the year 500. The site of the battle is unknown, though Badbury Hill above the Vale of White Horse and Badbury near Swindon are possible candidates. In any case the enemy was evidently the Saxon warriors of the South-East.'[10] Jackson's advocacy of Badbury near Swindon is close to the arguments for Braydon given below. He later said this. Although 'the exact date has been much disputed, it must have been not far from 500. This suits remarkably the known history of southern England, from which it appears that the Anglo-Saxon penetration of the south-east during the first half-century of the invasion was stopped about 500, when it had reached the borders of Salisbury Plain in Berkshire and Hampshire, and was not resumed until another half-century later. Mount Badon must be somewhere in this area' as being 'evidently somewhere in Wessex.'[11]

The 1960s saw little fundamental change. Count Tolstoy, in an ingenious account, argues that the 'Badon was fought in the forty-fourth year' after Ambrosius. Since he places the Battle of *Guoloph* or Wallop (in west Hampshire) in 458, that puts Badon in 501, and even 'on Friday, 29 January 501'.[12] But Gildas did not write as late as 544. An official archaeological map shows more pagan burials in the Winchester and Salisbury regions than were indicated by Rees in 1951. It also represents Roman roads and prehistoric trackways.[13] Precise dating of those burials may indicate whether an attack in 493 was more likely to come from Abingdon and Dorchester-on-Thames, or else Winchester, or these places combined.

Sheppard Frere summed up the then orthodoxy in careful words. 'A long period of fluctuating warfare culminated at some date rather before 500 than after in a British victory at Mount Badon, an unidentified site perhaps in the south-west; after it there was peace for two generations. Gildas, writing soon after 540, is able to speak of "our present security" and of a generation which had no experience of the great struggle.'[14] Bishop Hanson had a slightly

[9] Rees 1951, plates 18, 19.
[10] Jackson 1953, 199.
[11] Jackson 1959a, 2, 4.
[12] Tolstoy 1960–62, 149–54.
[13] *Map of Britain* 1966.
[14] Frere 1967, 382–83.

different angle. After acerbic comments on speculations by Nora Chadwick and (especially) John Morris, he nevertheless took the Saxons as conquering up to the Solent but thereafter being 'driven back and contained by the action of Ambrosius, and perhaps of Arthur'. The final victory of Mons Badonis located by some at Badbury Rings in Dorset 'is assigned by all the authorities to about the year 500'.[15] Similar is the statement (after Stenton) on how the date, 'judging by all available evidence, is believed to be about AD 500'.[16]

An interesting challenge to orthodoxy then came from Leslie Alcock. He accepted that 516 CE in the annals is impossible for Badon if Maelgwn (a Gwynedd ruler denounced by Gildas) died in 547 and it took place 43 years before the time of writing. There is a further difficulty. A Welsh-Latin document 'dates the conflict of Ambrosius and Vitolinus, *Catguoloph*, to 437. If Ambrosius was already an eminent general by that date, it is unlikely that he saw active service after 475', while other considerations led Alcock to favour 490 CE for Badon.[17] The problem is best resolved by relating the conflict of 437 (which was certainly at Wallop, near the Roman road from Winchester to Salisbury) not to Ambrosius Aurelianus but to his father, as implied by Gildas's comments on the family's status.

Rightly taking Arthur as a Northerner, and Mount Badon as in south Britain (with a swipe at the 'Somerset, with its mythical "Camelot" ' of Leslie Alcock), Charles Thomas followed John Morris on the battle as of about 500 CE.[18] In a posthumous book, Morris spoke of British victory in 'the 490s, a few years on either side of 495', which is true; of the English coming 'to besiege Arthur on Badon Hill, near Bath', which is false; and of Arthur himself as an 'emperor' fighting campaigns throughout Britain, which is fantasy.[19] Ian Wood here performed a dramatic telescoping of events, with Gildas writing at the very time of the engagement, the 43 years being the time-lapse since the victory of Ambrosius in another conflict. 'At the earliest the *De Excidio* would belong to the last fifteen years of the fifth century, at the latest to the 520s.'[20] But nobody has accepted this.

Writing in his mid-80s, Myres repeated views on Badon expressed 50 years previously, still putting it no 'earlier than 490 or later than 516'.[21] Wallace-Hadrill, with judicial astuteness, observed that while Bede dated Badon to

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[15] Hanson 1968, 19.
[16] Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 54.
[17] Alcock 1971, 53–54, 110–11.
[18] Thomas 1981, 251.
[19] Morris 1982, 332, 338.
[20] Wood 1984, 23.
[21] Myres 1986, 226–27.