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The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur

Thomas Green

1. Introduction

Many different theories are available as to the 'identity' of Arthur and some brief methodological notes will be found here regarding the making of such identifications. While these theories are interesting, they fail to address fully one important question – was there a historical post-Roman Arthur? Many books, articles and web-pages simply make the *a priori* assumption that there has to be a historical figure behind the Arthurian legends. Such an assumption is totally unjustified. As anyone at all familiar with medieval literature in general will know, the historicisation of non-historical/mythical personages – often through association with some important event of the past – is not in any way an unusual occurrence. Some examples of this that will probably particularly interest readers of this article are Hengest and Horsa, who were Kentish totemic horse-gods historicised by the eighth century with an important role in the fifth-century Anglo-Saxon conquest of eastern Britain (see Turville-Petre, 1953-7; Ward, 1969; Brooks, 1989; Yorke, 1993); Merlin (Welsh *Myrddin*), who was an eponymous founder-figure derived from the place-name *Caer-fyrddin* and historicised with the deeds of one Lailoken (see Jarman, 1991); and the Norse demigod Sigurd/Siegfried who was historicised by being associated with a famous historical battle between the Huns and the Burgundians dated A.D. 437, in the *Nibelungenlied* (Thomas, 1995: 390).¹ Given this, no *a priori* judgements can be made as to whether a figure is, in origin, historical, mythical or fictional – each individual case must (and can only) be decided by a close examination of all the relevant material. When we

have figures such as Arthur being portrayed as historical we are therefore, on a very basic level, looking at *either* a historical figure *or* a legendary figure who became historicised, with neither explanation enjoying priority on *a priori* grounds – it must be recognised that one can only say that there has to have been a historical Arthur once all the material has been evaluated and this has been shown to be the case; there is no possible justification for simply assuming this. The following article is intended to provide a summary account and bibliography of the latest academic research into Arthur with a particular focus on the question of historicity. Aside from the various articles and books cited, much of what is below has been discussed in detail on the discussion list of the International Arthurian Society, *Arthurnet*, in a moderated debate that I had the great pleasure of chairing. The results of this discussion, including all posted comments, can be found in the *Arthurnet* archives.

2. The Historical Arthur: an Analytical and Bibliographic Survey

Any inquiry into the ‘historical’ Arthur must proceed from the sources. One of the most important sources for the student of post-Roman Britain is archaeology and, indeed, the case is sometimes made that it is our only reliable source (see, for example, Arnold, 1984). When looking at Arthur’s possible historicity however, archaeology cannot really help as it deals with sites not people – it can show that a site was occupied in the right period but only very rarely (that is, when we have an inscription) can it tell us who the occupier was. The only piece of archaeological data which might have been significant to the debate is the Glastonbury cross naming King Arthur as the occupant of the grave it was supposedly found in by the monks of Glastonbury in 1191. Some have suggested a mid-tenth- or eleventh-century date for this (for example, Radford, 1968; Alcock, 1971) but it is now clear that it was the product of a late twelfth-century fraud and derivative of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and thus of no use in the search for a historical Arthur (see Rahtz, 1993; Carey, 1999; Carley, 1999; Gransden, 1976; *Somerset and Dorset Notes & Queries* for 1984; there was a copy of Geoffrey’s *Historia* at Glastonbury from *c.* 1170. The early sixth-century inscribed stone that has recently been found at Tintagel does *not* refer to Arthur, contrary to reports by English Heritage and the media). Given the above, any conclusions regarding Arthur’s historicity, or lack thereof, must be drawn from the textual references to him.

The King Arthur we encounter in the later medieval texts (and with which people are often most familiar) is not the Arthur of earlier works – shortly before A.D. 1139 Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Galfridus Monemutensis*) completed his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (‘History of the Kings of Britain’) which glorified Arthur and made him an international warlord. This work quickly became influential throughout western Europe and affected the Arthurian legend in all areas with the result that, in general, scholars look to sources written before Geoffrey’s *Historia* for the ‘original’ Arthur (that is, in the ‘pre-Galfridian’ sources). One well known dissenter from this is Geoffrey Ashe (1981; 1985; 1995) who argues that Riotamus, a fifth-century ‘king’ of the Britons who campaigned on the continent, is the actual historical prototype of Arthur and Geoffrey of Monmouth drew on this tradition when writing his *magnum opus*. While this theory is quite popular it is rightly dismissed by academic commentators as nothing more than ‘straws in the wind’ (Bromwich *et al*, 1991: 6. See also Padel, 1994: 31, n. 113; Hanning, 1995; Padel, 1995) on the grounds that, while Riotamus (or Breton traditions about this figure) could be the (partial) inspiration for Geoffrey’s *portrayal* of Arthur, he has nothing at all in common with the insular traditions of Arthur and thus cannot be the prototype for Arthur as a whole (indeed, he doesn’t even have the correct name – Ashe explains this by saying that

Riotamus was a title and Arthur was his real name but a recent reviewer (Padel, 1995) has shown this to be untenable). The above means that the historical Arthur, if he existed, will be found in the pre-Galfridian texts and it is to these we must now turn.

The pre-Galfridian sources for Arthur can be most conveniently read in Coe and Young (1995), which provides facing text and translation. Some earlier historians, such as John Morris (1973), tried to make use of, as historical texts, all the sources which mentioned Arthur including, for example, the Saints' Lives and late poetry. This tendency has been correctly and heavily criticised by David Dumville (1977a), amongst others, mainly because these sources cannot be seen as in any way historically reliable – we are therefore, when looking at a possibly historical Arthur and in the light of Dumville's comments, essentially confined to four pieces of evidence which might contain information of real historical value: the *Annales Cambriae* (Phillimore, 1888; Morris, 1980); the *Historia Brittonum* (Morris, 1980; Dumville, 1985; Koch and Carey, 1995); the collection of heroic death-songs known as *Y Gododdin* (Jackson, 1969; Jarman, 1988; Koch, 1997); and the four or five occurrences of the name Arthur in sixth- and seventh-century contexts (Barber, 1972; Bromwich 1975-6; Coe and Young, 1995: 156-65).

Dealing with the last of these first, the occurrence of four (or possibly five) people named 'Arthur' in sixth- and seventh-century western Scotland and Wales has often been seen as one of the best pieces of evidence for a historical Arthur – the argument is, essentially, that the appearance of these names reflects the commemoration of an earlier historical figure (see, for example, Chadwick and Chadwick, 1932).² However such a commemoration by name of an earlier historical hero would be totally unparalleled in the Celtic world and as such cannot be at all supported as an explanation of these names (see Bromwich, 1975-6: 178-79). Thus these names cannot be used as evidence for a historical Arthur and as long as we continue to see Arthur as genuinely historical they are likely to remain a lasting crux (at present there is only one viable explanation of these names, that proposed by Oliver Padel (1994: 24) – see below on this. It is worth noting that none of these 'Arthurs' can be seen as the 'original' Arthur, *pace* Barber, 1972 – see Bromwich, 1975-6: 179; Jackson, 1973; Roberts, 1973-4).

The second source for consideration is the collection of heroic death-songs known as *Y Gododdin*, relating to a battle fought in the late sixth century. In recent years there has been considerable debate over the statement in *Y Gododdin* that Gordur 'fed black ravens on the rampart of a fort, although he was no Arthur' (B.38. Koch (1997) numbers this B².38). Thomas Charles-Edwards (1991: 14), building on his theory of textual transmission (set forth in Charles-Edwards, 1978), concluded that, as the reference only occurs in the B version and not the A version of *Y Gododdin*, it need be no older than the ninth or tenth century. Recently, however, Koch (1997) has attempted a 'reconstruction' of the 'original' text of *Y Gododdin* and includes the 'Arthurian' reference in this text, dated by him to pre-A.D. 638. Whilst his is certainly an interesting exercise in discovering how *Y Gododdin* might have looked if it was of sixth- or seventh-century date, the limitations of this 'reconstruction' must be recognised. As one reviewer has noted, Koch's text is, in reality, a *translation* of *Y Gododdin* into the language of *c.* A.D. 600 and in this it must be seen in the same light as Jarman's earlier translation of this text into modern Welsh (Jarman, 1988) – Koch has not shown that *Y Gododdin* was composed in this period, only what it might have looked like *if* it had been (Padel, 1998). Indeed, Isaac has demonstrated that Koch's whole theory of the creation and transmission of *Y Gododdin*, including the idea that B² represents the Ur-text, cannot be at all supported (Isaac, 1999). Similar caveats have been shown to apply to Koch's 'reconstruction' of the poem *Gweith Gwen Ystrat*, with Isaac demonstrating that whilst one can undertake such an exercise and show how this poem would have looked if it had been composed *c.* A.D. 600, such a reconstruction is entirely unwarranted and there is no reason to think that the

text was composed in this period (Isaac, 1998). Given the above, it seems clear that, despite Koch's assertions, '[t]he date of composition [of *Y Gododdin*] remains as unclear as ever' (Padel, 1998: 55). Indeed Isaac (1996; 1999) has recently followed D. Simon Evans (1978) in arguing that there is no linguistic evidence that would necessitate dating *Y Gododdin* as a whole before the ninth or tenth century and, in light of all of this, Charles-Edwards' comments on the antiquity of the Arthurian references in this text must stand.

Turning to the 'Arthurian' *awdl* ('stanza') of *Y Gododdin*, how does this reference affect the question of Arthur's historicity, given that Arthur only appears as a comparison to a warrior of (supposedly) the late sixth century? One common argument is that in works such as *Y Gododdin* the figures named are always believed to be historical and therefore the Arthurian *awdl* would seem to indicate that by the ninth or tenth century Arthur was believed to have been a historical personage, at least by the author of *Y Gododdin* (see Jarman, 1989-90; Bromwich *et al*, 1991). Whilst superficially convincing, there are considerable problems with such a judgement. First, the simple fact of the matter is that we can only identify a few of the characters that appear in early Welsh heroic poetry; many of the people in the poems appear only there, so that we have no knowledge of whether they were (or were thought to be) historical or not – it is an assumption, nothing more, that everyone in these poems was a real historical figure and as such we cannot take Arthur's presence in *Y Gododdin* as evidence either for his historicity or a belief in his historicity. Second, the assumption may well not have a sound basis as Rowland has recently noted that the people who appear in these works (and are recognisable) are *nearly* all historical figures, that Gereint like *most of the heroes* identifiable in this type of poetry is a historical figure (Rowland, 1990). Given this, there is no reason for making any such assumptions. Third, in *Y Gododdin* Arthur is in the remarkable position of appearing 'only not to appear' (Padel, 1994: 14). Unlike Gordur or the other warriors he is not actually present at the battle: 'In the allusion, Arthur is presented as the unrivalled paragon of martial valour and is thus used to form a highly unusual comparison by rendering explicitly inferior the honorand of the *awdl* ("stanza"). Therefore, if the relevant *awdl* and lines can be sustained as Aneirin's original, this would tell us that by the later sixth century there existed in North Britain a tradition of a Brittonic superhero Arthur...' (Koch, 1996: 242). Whilst we might not be able to accept Koch's assertions on dating, we can say that Arthur is essentially a 'highly unusual comparison', not a warrior who is being honoured; he is not envisaged as being present at the battle and he is a military 'superhero', someone to whose heights of valour not even a man who killed 300 in one rush could compare. He is therefore in a different league to the rest of the figures who appear in *Y Gododdin* and, as such, there is no reason to think that assumptions drawn from the identifications of a few characters in the text as a whole, even if they were viable, would apply to him. All the *Y Gododdin* reference tells us is that Arthur was seen, by the ninth or tenth century, as 'the impossible comparison' (Padel, 1994: 14), a 'superhero' to whom not even the greatest living warrior could compare; it does *not* tell us whether this reflects a mythical 'superhero' named Arthur or a historical Arthur mythicised and Arthur is, in the text, in no way associated with the defence of post-Roman Britain or any specific period of history.³

In light of the fact that neither of the above can help in the investigation of Arthur's possible 'historicity', the case for a historical Arthur rests entirely on two sources, the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae*, both of which would appear to have a concept of Arthur that is (at least partly) unequivocally historical. The *Historia Brittonum* was written anonymously in A.D. 829/30, the ascription to one 'Nennius' now being regarded as false (Dumville, 1974; 1975-6, though see Field, 1996). There is considerable debate over the nature of the text (see, for example, Dumville, 1986; Charles-Edwards,

1991; Dumville, 1994; Koch, 1997; Howlett, 1998) but it now seems clear that the writer of the *Historia* was not an ignorant and incompetent compiler who simply ‘made a heap’ of earlier sources but rather an ‘author’ who wrote the *Historia Brittonum* with a unity of structure and outlook and engaged in the active processing of his sources, and this conclusion is endorsed by the researches of David Howlett who sees the *Historia* as a work of architectonic genius making use of the sophisticated ‘Biblical style’ in its construction (Howlett, pers. comm.; 1998: chapter 5. For the Celtic-Latin tradition of Biblical style see Howlett, 1995).

Given the above, we must question to what extent the author altered his sources for his own purposes, what were the nature of his sources, and thus how far can we trust what we read in the *Historia*? Dumville (1986) took a very pessimistic line on this, arguing that it was a source only for the ninth century and its concerns. While this view has been challenged by Thomas Charles-Edwards (1991), who identifies the *Historia* as a fusion of the two historical genres, *historia gentis* and *historia ecclesiastica*, it is still clearly the case that ‘even where credit might be given to the supposed source [of a section of the *Historia*], the author’s methods... do not encourage us to be confident about the possibility of recovering usable information about the period whose history he was narrating. His procedures were synthetic and interpretive, his sources overwhelmingly non-contemporaneous with the events which they purport to describe’ (Dumville, 1994: 419).⁴ As such the *Historia* is of very dubious historical value, for example, in addition to many of its sources being of a similar date to itself and suspect in nature, the *Historia* can be shown to portray characters who are decidedly mythical in origin, such as Hengest and Horsa (see Turville-Petre, 1953-7; Ward, 1969; Brooks, 1989; Yorke, 1993), as genuinely historical. Indeed, as a number of recent commentators have recognised, the *Historia Brittonum* is in fact a synchronising and synthetic history of the type well known from medieval Ireland, fusing sources for its own political ends and involved in the creation of a full national pseudo-history, a process which was closely allied with the historicising of legend (Padel, 1994: 23; Carey, 1994; Dumville, 1994; Coe and Young, 1995: 6). Directly relevant to this question of the ‘historical value’ of the *Historia Brittonum* is the fact that the author of the *Historia* was not writing ‘history’ as we know it today but was rather engaging in something more akin to that which we would call sermonising, and this must be remembered in any analysis of the *Historia*. To try and read such works as the *Historia* as linear history is completely false to the methods and assumptions with which they were composed (see Hanning, 1966; Howlett, 1998; N. Hinton, pers. comm.).

This leads us to Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum*, which contains the references to a ‘historical’ Arthur. This is ‘a pseudo-historical account of a suspiciously formulaic list of twelve battles against Germanic invaders’ (Coe and Young, 1995: 6), supposedly fought by Arthur. Some have suggested (for example, Chadwick and Chadwick, 1932; Jones, 1964) that Chapter 56 could have been based on a poem written in Welsh that was translated into Latin by the author of the *Historia*. Whilst this is an interesting suggestion it has to be recognised that such a notion is speculation and it does not allow us to give this section of the *Historia* an early date. Indeed, various considerations indicate that any such hypothetical poem would date to much the same period as the *Historia* anyway (see Jackson, 1945-6: 57; Jackson, 1959a: 7-8; Dumville, 1977a: 188; Jarman, 1981: 2-3; Dumville, 1986: 13-14; Charles-Edwards, 1991: 21-29; Padel, 1994).⁵ Furthermore it must not be forgotten that, with the writer of the *Historia Brittonum* now seen as an author actively manipulating his text to create a synthetic pseudo-history rather than a simple compiler, Chapter 56 was, to some large extent, his creation. This is underlined by Howlett’s (1998: chapter 5) discovery that this section is written in the highly complex ‘Biblical style’, showing that Chapter 56 was an integral part of the *Historia* that was created, engineered and planned by the author in accordance with his aims and

methodology. As such the notion that Chapter 56 might represent anything like a postulated earlier source incorporated bodily into the text of the *Historia* can be rejected. Instead it seems clear that this chapter, along with its concept of Arthur, cannot be separated from the *Historia* as a whole, the aims, methodology, unity of structure and outlook with which this was created, or, indeed, the general comments of Dumville and others on the nature of the *Historia* and its sources noted above (see further Hanning, 1966; Barber, 1972: 101ff.; Charles-Edwards, 1991: 21ff. on Chapter 56 as an integral and inseparable part of the *Historia*). The best we can therefore honestly say is that in the *Historia Brittonum*, a source of very dubious historical value (which can be shown to portray mythical figures as genuinely historical), we have evidence for the idea that Arthur was a historical figure being current by A.D. 829/30 at the latest.

Our last source, the *Annales Cambriae*, was compiled in 950s and is sometimes seen as providing good evidence for Arthur being a historical figure (see Grabowski and Dumville, 1984 for the dating. Studies and commentaries on the text include Jones, 1964; Alcock, 1971; Hughes, 1980; Grabowski and Dumville, 1984; Dumville, 1990; Charles-Edwards, 1991 and Koch, 1996. Dumville apparently has a new study of the *Annales* forthcoming). It mentions Arthur in two entries: that for A.D. 516 which tells of the 'battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights, and the Britons were the victors' and that for A.D. 537 concerning 'the battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell'. In assessing the value of these entries, considerable attention should be paid to the date of these annals. Jones (1964) and Alcock (1971) were both inclined to see at least one of these annals as a contemporary record of Arthur and, if it could be accepted, such a conclusion would 'prove' Arthur's historicity. However, Hughes (1980) in her important and extensive studies of the *Annales* reached a rather different (and convincing) conclusion, and this has been built upon by Dumville (in Grabowski and Dumville, 1984) and Charles-Edwards (1991) – the *Annales Cambriae* to 613 is basically a version of the 'Chronicle of Ireland', with the sections from 613 to 777 being based on North British materials; there is absolutely no justification for thinking that any of the pre-613 British entries are drawn from contemporary or even near-contemporary sources and, rather, they should be seen as retrospective interpolations dating from between the very late eighth century (the period in which the 'Chronicle of Ireland' was first brought together with the post-613 North British materials at St David's in order to extend backwards a chronicle kept by that community from the closing years of the eighth century onwards) and the mid-tenth century (when the *Annales* reached something like its final form). Indeed, in light of Dumville's further researches into the date of this bringing together, the above *terminus post quem* for the interpolations might well be shifted forward to the early-mid-tenth century.

Looking at the annals themselves, one very important point must be made: the Badon entry in the *Annales* is not an independent witness to Arthur's historicity. Instead it is clearly related to the *Historia Brittonum's* account (Chapter 56) of Arthur's eighth battle at *Guinnion* Castle, in which Arthur carries an icon on his shoulders into battle with him, and as such the *Annales* account either derives from the *Historia Brittonum* or its source. Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested (1991: 25-28) that they be seen as dual elaborations of single original, the entry in neither case being very much older than the text it is contained in (829/30 for the *Historia* and the 950s for the *Annales*). However, a more convincing explanation has been provided by John Koch. Koch observes that both the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* have the probable confusion of Old Welsh *scuit* 'shield' and *scuid* 'shoulder' in them and notes that 'that error of transmission is hardly likely to have come about twice'. He goes on to say that 'In all details, the *Annales Cambriae* entry is more easily understood as derived from *Historia Brittonum's* account',

which would appear to be the most probable scenario on the present evidence and is sound even without the support of the *scuit/d* confusion (see Koch, 1996: 252-53 for discussion; also Barber, 1972: 105). Similarly the second entry regarding Camlann is best viewed as non-traditional and as having mid-tenth-century origins (see Charles-Edwards, 1991: 25-27, 28; Ashe, 1986: 76-78; Wood, 1981: 59-60; Bromwich, 1978a: 487; Jarman, 1983: 109), with the consequence that the *Annales Cambriae* cannot really be seen to be of any independent value in making the case for a 'historical Arthur'. As a result we are forced to return to the text of the *Historia Brittonum*.

Whilst general comments on Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* have been made, a more detailed examination of the information contained within it may prove enlightening. It is easy to assume that all the battles mentioned in Chapter 56 were remembered as being those fought by Arthur but such assumptions may well be incorrect. Perhaps the most famous 'Arthurian' battle is that of Badon (*in montis badonis*) but the reference to this has serious problems. It has long been accepted that this is the same battle as the *obsessio Badonici montis* of Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae* § 26 (see Winterbottom, 1978 for an edition and translation. The date of publication of this work, and thus the date of Badon, has been much discussed – see for example Miller, 1975; O'Sullivan, 1978; Sims-Williams, 1983; Lapidge and Dumville (edd.), 1984; Higham, 1994; Howlett, 1998)⁶ and one of the arguments against Arthur's historicity has always been that Gildas fails to mention Arthur in his reference to the battle.⁷ It is usually countered (as Jackson 1959a) that he was deliberately omitted, either because Gildas didn't approve of him or because his contribution to the victory was too well known, but recent work suggests that the reason Arthur was not mentioned was indeed because he was not associated with the battle when Gildas wrote. Rather than not naming anyone as the British leader at Badon, Gildas does indeed assign Badon a victor – Ambrosius Aurelianus. The idea that this figure was the true victor has been previously dismissed on the grounds that the manuscript (British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.vi) implies a major interval between Ambrosius and Badon. Oliver Padel has returned to the original manuscript however and has been able to show that the break evident in Winterbottom's edition (1978) has no manuscript authority and rather that Mount Badon now 'reads naturally as the victory that crowned the career of Ambrosius Aurelianus' (Padel, 1994: 16-18 at p. 17. For further very good reasons to doubt the attribution of Badon to Arthur see Jones, 1964; Bromwich, 1978a: 276; Bromwich *et al*, 1991: 3-4. There seems to be good evidence for the existence of traditions about Badon which did not associate it with Arthur – see Bromwich, 1978a). This is all, of course, of the utmost significance as it further undermines our faith in the 'traditions' recorded in the *Historia Brittonum* – it seems very probable that in the case of Badon we are seeing a battle that had originally been fought by another leader being attributed to Arthur by the ninth century (It is interesting to note that this conclusion has also recently been reached – apparently without knowledge of Padel's work – by Woods (1999: 34-38) who, like Padel, returns to the original manuscript and finds the un-edited text clearly indicating that Gildas saw Badon as being won by Ambrosius). This tendency would appear not to be restricted to the battle of Badon – similar cases can be made for the eleventh, ninth and seventh battles (see Jackson, 1945-6; Jackson, 1949; Bromwich 1975-6 and Padel, 1994: 18-19). The other battles are largely unidentifiable,⁸ though the tenth, the 'battle on the bank of a river which is called Tribruit', is recorded elsewhere in very early sources as a traditional battle against werewolves, thus casting further doubt on the *Historia's* value; similarly a good case can be made for seeing *Cat Coit Celidon* in Chapter 56 as the entirely mythical battle of trees recorded in the archaic poem from the Book of Taliesin, *Kat Goden*.

Other elements within the body of Chapter 56 appear similarly suspect. For example, Hanning (1966: 119-20) and Charles-Edwards (1991: 24-25 and 28) have

respectively shown that both the number of battles and the reference to Arthur as *dux bellorum* would seem to reflect the needs of the author of the *Historia* rather than any postulated earlier source. Whether or not all of the above conclusions regarding the identification of the battles are accepted it can be said, bringing all this together, that in the *Historia Brittonum*, our only really usable source for a ‘historical’ Arthur, we have a text which cannot be at all relied upon to pre-date the ninth century and the contents of which can be described as being, at the very least, suspect – as such it can tell us virtually nothing certain about any possible ‘historical’ Arthur. Indeed, the whole portrayal of Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum* might be seen to reflect the needs and aims of the ninth-century author rather than genuinely ancient tradition, as we might expect given the nature of the text as a whole (see Hanning, 1966; Dumville, 1986; Charles-Edwards, 1991: 21-29; Dumville, 1994; Coe and Young, 1995: 6-7; Howlett, 1998). The failure of the *Historia* as a source of information regarding any historical Arthur and the consequent intangibility of this ‘historical’ Arthur is a fact which has often been remarked upon: as Dumville has written, ‘This is not the stuff of which history can be made’ (1977a: 188. See further Jackson, 1945-6; Jackson, 1959a; Jones, 1964; Bromwich, 1974-5; Dumville, 1977a; Charles-Edwards, 1991; Padel, 1994, and also Dumville’s (1994) comments on the *Historia* as a whole).

What then of the case for Arthur’s historicity? It should be obvious that, even when we restrict ourselves to the best sources for a ‘historical’ Arthur, as discussed above, we can come to no solid conclusions regarding historicity. The four occurrences of the name Arthur in southern Scotland and southern Wales in the sixth and seventh centuries cannot be seen as evidence for a historical Arthur; indeed they defy interpretation if we have a historical Arthur. The *Y Gododdin* reference clearly reflects a ninth- or tenth-century (and possibly earlier) concept of Arthur as a military ‘superhero’ but this concept of Arthur could result either from a mythical figure being used as ‘the impossible comparison’ or a historical figure being mythicised as a paragon of valour – thus this reference cannot help us to reach any solid conclusions. The case for a historical Arthur must therefore be based on only two sources, the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae*, and neither of these can be seen as a reliable witness to historicity, both being late in date and suspect in content, with the latter very probably being derivative of the former and the former being a synthetic pseudo-history known to portray mythical figures as historical – as such, these sources cannot in any way prove that there was a historical fifth-/sixth-century Arthur and no contemporary or near-contemporary source makes any mention of him.⁹ The best we can say is that there existed by the ninth-century at the latest a concept of Arthur as a historical figure; our sources are simply not of the quality that would allow us to come to any firmer conclusion than this.¹⁰

Against this we have to set the evidence for the existence of a concept of Arthur as a legendary figure. Whatever else we might say about it, *Y Gododdin* (and, it might be added, *Marnnad Cynddylan*) very clearly possesses a concept of Arthur as a mythical ‘superhero’, not a historical figure. Similarly in the *Historia Brittonum*, the earliest source to portray Arthur as ‘historical’, Arthur appears not only in the ‘historical’ light of Chapter 56 but also in a manifestly legendary folkloric light in Chapter 73 (an important point that is too often overlooked, particularly as the legends recorded here are considered to pre-date the ninth century, see Bromwich and Evans, 1992: lxvi), and this same concept of Arthur as a mythical hero is found in a number of other early sources, such as the eighth-century *Preideu Annwfn* (Padel, 1994; Koch, 1996: 263-65, etc.. See further below). Given this, a concept of Arthur as a figure of myth and legend can be demonstrated to be present as early as (and, indeed, earlier than) a concept of Arthur as a historical figure. Here we must return to the methodological comments made at the beginning of this study. As was there noted, there are numerous examples of mythical or fictional figures being

historicised, often in association with some important event of the past, and consequently ‘no *a priori* judgements can be made as to whether a figure is, in origin, historical, mythical or fictional – each individual case must (and can only) be decided by a close examination of all the relevant material.’ Each of these possibilities is equally as likely to be true, on *a priori* grounds, as the others; the burden of proof lies with all sides. In the absence of such proof we simply cannot assume – in the ‘no smoke without fire’ mould – that one explanation of figures such as Arthur enjoys priority over the others: it does not. Thus whilst the above ‘legendary Arthur’ might be the result of a historical figure being mythicised, it is at least equally as likely that, in the absence of good evidence either way, the above ‘historical Arthur’ was a result of a legendary figure being historicised (it is perhaps worth noting with regards to this that the ‘process of historicising legends was a widespread feature of Celtic literary activity in the Middle Ages’ (Padel, 1994: 23)).

Hence in answer to the question ‘Was there a historical Arthur?’, the sources being questioned (*i.e.* the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae*) can only answer ‘perhaps, maybe’ – they cannot say ‘no there wasn’t’ for obvious reasons but equally they cannot say ‘yes there was’: the nature and quality of the sources for a ‘historical’ Arthur is quite simply such that they neither show nor demand a historical figure to lie behind them and we most definitely cannot assume one in the absence of this. Whilst it is possible that Chapter 56 of the *Historia* reflects, to some extent, the distorted but genuine traditions of a ‘historical Arthur’, it is at least equally as likely, given the nature of our sources, their claims to reliability and the fact that a concept of Arthur as a mythical hero existed from at least the eighth century, that the opposite is true and that these references simply reflect a legendary figure (such as that of Chapter 73 of the *Historia*) historicised by the ninth century. Arthur could well be a mythical figure portrayed as historical by the author of the *Historia Brittonum* in just the same way as Hengest and Horsa were mythical figures portrayed as historical by both Bede and the author of the *Historia*. In the absence of *a priori* assumptions regarding historicity, a detailed investigation of the ‘relevant material’ (as required by the above methodology) has left us with a situation in which the information contained within these late references could still reflect *either* a historical figure *or* a legendary figure historicised with no convincing reason, from the internal evidence of these few sources, for accepting one alternative over the other. To put it another way, there is no obvious reason from the material discussed above to prefer the portrayal of Arthur in Chapter 56 of the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* over that in Chapter 73, or vice versa.¹¹

Part of the problem, of course, lies with methodology. When the case for a historical fifth-/sixth-century Arthur is made, it involves trawling the pre-Galfridian source material for anything that might be used to back it up. The interest is not with the pre-Galfridian material itself and with what it tells us but rather with what it can tell us about a possibly historical figure called Arthur. The texts selected to answer this question, as in the above analysis, are thus divorced from the context of the whole body of pre-Galfridian material in which they must surely be viewed and of which they form an integral part. By asking ‘Was there a historical Arthur?’ one *forces* the texts to answer ‘perhaps, maybe’; they have no other choice because, on the basis of the few sources selected and the viewing of these few sources in isolation, they are incapable of denying that there was such a figure just as they are incapable of confirming it. As such this ‘perhaps, maybe’ is in reality valueless. What this means is that conclusions regarding Arthur’s historicity can and should only be drawn via a sound methodology, namely by looking at *all* the available evidence and allowing it to ‘lead’, not forcing it to conform to preconceived notions. The *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* references must be seen in the context of all the early Arthurian material, not as discrete pieces of

information that can be mined for ‘facts’. No judgements of any value can be made by attacking the pre-Galfridian corpus in a piecemeal fashion – one has to look at the weight of the body of evidence as a whole. To quote Padel, ‘the nature of the inquiry, which hitherto has always started with the natural question “was there a historical Arthur?”, has determined its outcome (“Yes, perhaps”)’ (Padel, 1994: 2. Ashe (1995) also makes this point). By commencing an examination of the pre-Galfridian material with a view to discovering (or, at least, investigating) a truly historical figure of the post-Roman period the conclusions reached are unavoidably biased and the investigation ignores the majority of the available early evidence.

We must therefore ask, what is the nature of Arthur in the pre-Galfridian sources with which we are here primarily concerned with? Where does the ‘weight’ of the evidence ‘lead’ us? What is the context of the ‘historical’ sources? The most recent attempt to define this ‘nature’ (which then proceeds, after doing this, to adopt the above methodology and look at the *Annales* and *Historia* references in the context of this nature) is by Oliver Padel.¹² The conclusion reached is that, when the pre-Galfridian sources are approached without such preconceived agendas and *a priori* assumptions as described above, the results prove to be most interesting: ‘if the collective evidence is first allowed to speak for itself, its weight is quite different.’ (Padel, 1994: 2). In non-Galfridian tradition, Arthur was very clearly ‘the leader of a band of heroes who live outside of society, whose main world is one of magical animals, giants and other wonderful happenings, located in the wild parts of the landscape.’ (Padel, 1994: 14); Arthur is portrayed as a figure of pan-Brittonic¹³ folklore and mythology, associated with the Otherworld, supernatural enemies and superhuman deeds, not history. This concept of Arthur occurs in both the very earliest of these sources (earlier than and contemporary with the earliest references to a possibly ‘historical Arthur’) and, indeed, in the vast majority of the non-Galfridian sources, with these sources consistent in their portrayal of Arthur. For example, it appears in the eighth-century or earlier mythological poem *Preiddeu Annwnfyn* (see Koch, 1996: 263-65), the very early mythological poem *Kat Godeu* (see Ford, 1977 for a translation), Chapter 73 of the *Historia Brittonum* (the folklore contained in which is considered to be ‘already ancient by the ninth century’ (Bromwich and Evans 1992: lxvi)), *Pa gur yv y porthaur?* (which might be as early as the ninth century, or even the eighth, and is, itself, simply a summary of many earlier entirely mythical Arthurian tales (Bromwich, 1978b: 21; Koch, 1996; Koch, 1994: 1127; Edel, 1983)), and *Culhwch ac Olwen* (which was written in the eleventh century but is a literary composition based on a number of earlier legendary Arthurian tales brought together with the ‘giant’s daughter’ folklore tale-type – the Arthurian material is generally considered to represent the same body of very early non-historical tales as *Pa gur yv y porthaur?*, *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 73 and *Preiddeu Annwnfyn* do: see Edel, 1983; Bromwich and Evans, 1992).

Padel is not at all alone in seeing this as the context of the *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* references, though he has given the subject its fullest treatment. Two of the foremost authorities on early Arthurian literature, Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, have recently written that ‘Arthur was above all else... a defender of his country against every kind of danger, both internal and external: a slayer of giants and witches, a hunter of monstrous animals – giant boars, a savage cat monster, a winged serpent (or dragon) – and also, as it appears from *Culhwch* and *Preiddeu Annwn*, a releaser of prisoners. This concept of Arthur is substantiated from all the early sources: the poems *Pa Gur* and *Preiddeu Annwn*, the Triads, the Saints Lives, and the *Mirabilia* attached to the *Historia Brittonum*... in early literature he belongs, like Fionn, to the realm of mythology rather than to that of history.’ (Bromwich and Evans (edd.) 1992: xxviii-xxix. See Ford (1983) for some very interesting supplementary evidence for the view that the pre-Galfridian Arthur belongs to the realms of mythology. The above comments on the ‘nature of

Arthur' in early literature represent the general view among Celticists of this question, see for example Ford 1986; Jarman, 1983; Ross, 2001: chapter 4; and note 14 below). In essence, the vast majority of the non-Galfridian material, including the earliest sources, paints a notably consistent picture of Arthur as a pan-Brittonic folkloric hero, a peerless warrior of giant-like stature who leads a band of superhuman heroes that roam the wild places of the landscape, who raids the Otherworld whilst being intimately associated with it, who fights and protects Britain from supernatural enemies, who hunts wondrous animals and who takes part in mythical battles, and hence the 'weight' of this evidence indicates not a historical origin for Arthur but rather a legendary one (it is particularly worthy of note that Arthur is *never* associated with either the Saxons or Badon in the vast majority of the material, despite the fact that such an association is usually said to be the reason for his fame, and when this association does appear it is *only* present in those sources which are directly derivative of *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56). In fact, the Fionn parallel in the above quote is also noted by Padel in his article – it is his convincing conclusion that the nature of Arthur evidenced in the pre-Galfridian sources is *very* similar indeed to the nature of Fionn in Gaelic literature, this Fionn being an entirely mythical character (originally a god) who became associated (*i.e.* historicised) with the repelling of the Viking invasions of Ireland and who had a list of battles against his 'foes' attached to his name (for Fionn see Ó hÓgáin, 1988; Padel (1994) summarises some of the parallels on pp. 19-23). Van Hamel made some very similar observations regarding the nature of Arthur in the early sources and the very close parallels between him and Fionn, noting that it was but a natural, logical step 'to represent a hero of this type [*i.e.* a protector of Britain against supernatural threats] as a victor over the Saxons' (1934, quote at p. 231. See also Murphy, 1953: 213-17; MacKillop, 1986: 63-64; Koch, 1996: 261; Ross, 2001: chapter 4).¹⁴

How does this affect the question of Arthur's historicity? What then of those references to a 'historical' Arthur which, when viewed in isolation, can only answer the question 'Was there a historical Arthur?' with 'perhaps; maybe' and could at least just as easily represent a legendary figure historicised as the distorted remembrances of a 'genuinely' historical figure? To recapitulate, the conclusions resulting from the above discussion are:

(A) that one cannot assume that a character is historical simply because a medieval source claims that this is the case: such *a priori* assumptions are demonstrably false (Hengest & Horsa and Fionn being good examples of mythical figures historicised by later writers) and are thus unacceptable. One can only say that there was/has to have been a historical Arthur once all the material has been evaluated and this is shown to be the case. There is no possible justification for simply assuming this to be the case – 'historical' explanations of figures such as Arthur do not, on *a priori* grounds, enjoy priority over other explanations. Indeed, it should be remembered that the 'process of historicising legends was a widespread feature of Celtic literary activity in the Middle Ages.' (Padel, 1994: 23).

(B) that the few usable sources that we have which portray Arthur as 'historical' could very easily represent *either* a legendary figure historicised *or* the distorted traditions of a genuinely historical Arthur. Each possibility is equally as likely as the other judging from the internal evidence of the sources and, as such, no conclusions can be reached on the matter of historicity – there may have been a historical Arthur but at least equally as well there may not have been.

(C) that whilst it is true to say, as in (B) above, that *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56 etc. could just as easily reflect a legendary figure historicised as a genuinely historical personage, this method of analysis fails to answer the question of Arthur's historicity satisfactorily. By treating the 'historical Arthur' sources in isolation rather than in the context of the whole body of non-Galfridian Arthurian literature of which they form an integral part, valuable information is ignored that is essential to the interpretation of these sources and, as such, no conclusions of any value can be drawn. To give an example, we might have a charter purporting to be a grant of land to a monastery from a king. When this charter is viewed on its own the evidence internal to the charter may be such that no decision can be made over whether it is genuine or a forgery – in the absence of convincing evidence for either option each possibility might be said to be equally as likely. If, however, this charter is looked at in the context of all the other charters from that monastery then the situation is rather different: thus if, for example, all the other charters from that monastery appear to be forgeries then it seems very likely indeed that this charter too is a forgery. In the context of the body of material of which it forms an integral and inseparable part, it becomes clear that the two possibilities allowed by the internal evidence are not in fact equally as likely – when viewed in light of all the other material it remains remotely possible that the charter may be genuine but it is infinitely more probable that it is a forgery. In other words, the serious possibility that the charter is genuine only really existed because the charter was being analysed outside of the body of material of which it is an integral part, something which caused information essential to the interpretation of the charter to be ignored – when it is viewed within the context of all the material, there is simply no reason to think that it might be genuine; the charter's context is such that this is not, in the absence of evidence in its favour, a serious possibility. In the same way, conclusions regarding historicity can only be drawn from looking at the 'historical Arthur' texts in the context of the whole body of early material. The *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* references must be seen in the context of all the early Arthurian material, not as discrete pieces of information that can be mined for 'facts'; no judgements of any value can be made by attacking the pre-Galfridian corpus in a piecemeal fashion – one has to look at the weight of the body of evidence as a whole and allow it to 'lead'. To do otherwise simply biases the conclusions and ignores the vast majority of the available early evidence.

(D) that the weight of the non-Galfridian material (early and late) provides, as numerous scholars have noted, a very clear and consistent picture of Arthur as a thoroughly legendary figure of folklore and myth not associated in any way with either the Saxons or Badon, and with this figure resembling in many of its characteristics (and, indeed the development of its legend) the Gaelic Fionn who was a mythical figure – originally a god – later historicised with battles against foreign invaders.

These four relatively uncontroversial conclusions have, as should be obvious, some very interesting consequences for the question of Arthur's historicity. Following them through, it seems clear that if those few references which portray Arthur as historical are seen in the context of the material as a whole – as they have to be – then the weight of the material is such that there is absolutely no justification for believing there to have been a historical figure of the fifth or sixth century named Arthur who is the basis for all later legends. When the 'historical' references are pulled out of their context and viewed

in isolation then, as we have seen, they *may possibly* represent the distorted traditions of a historical figure but at least equally as well they may not. However, when they are viewed, as they must be, in the context of the body of material of which they are an integral part this ‘maybe’ evaporates. All the other evidence, the vast majority of the early material, portrays Arthur as an entirely legendary figure from the same mould as the Gaelic Fionn, and he is never connected in this material in any way with either the Saxons or Badon. As such there is simply no reason to think that there was a historical Arthur. The ‘maybe’ only appears when it is forced to, when the few references to a ‘historical’ Arthur are divorced from their context and made to answer questions regarding the possibility of a historical Arthur. If we ask what the material actually says rather than try and force any preconceived notions upon it then it appears, as Padel has observed, to very clearly tell of a legendary figure of folklore named *Art(h)ur* who was historicised in much the same way as Hengest or Fionn were – the serious possibility of there ever having been a ‘historical Arthur’ who was the ‘original’ from whom all the later tales spring is simply a construct based on a misuse of the sources. Therefore, rather than the folkloric Arthur evidenced in the *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 73 being an elaboration of the ‘historical’ Arthur of Chapter 56, this ‘legendary’ Arthur would appear to be ‘the true one, and the “historical” Arthur... the secondary development.’ (Padel, 1994: 30), a logical extension of his folkloric role, with not only the existence of Arthur but also his association with the fifth and sixth centuries being seen as most probably spurious (with regards to this, it should be noted that the post-Roman period was not the only period into which Arthur was historicised – see below). To put it another way, the context of the few ‘historical’ references is such that the onus of proof would seem to come to lie firmly on the shoulders of those who would have a historical fifth-/sixth-century Arthur as the basis for all the later legends – in the absence of proof of historicity (and in the absence of *a priori* assumptions and the forcing of preconceived agendas onto the sources) there is simply no reason to think that a ‘historical Arthur’ is a serious possibility.

We must consequently ask, can the ‘evidence’ for a ‘historical’ Arthur of the fifth/sixth century live up to this burden of proof? Does it provide any reason to believe that there was a fifth- or sixth-century figure named Arthur? Taken on its own, it can be legitimately said that the answer to this is ‘no’. Even when viewed outside of the context of the whole body of early material, thus in the most advantageous circumstances, it could (as has been seen above) only produce the answer ‘perhaps; maybe’; the Arthur portrayed in the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* could be easily understood as *either* a historical figure *or* a legendary one historicised. In the context of the pre-Galfridian material this answer becomes meaningless due to the shifting of the burden of proof – as such the ‘maybe’ has to be taken as a ‘no’. The *Historia* and the *Annales* do not provide the necessary proof that would allow us to disregard the context of the pre-Galfridian material (particularly as the latter is very probably derivative of the former, and the former is known to portray mythical figures as historical) and thus on the basis of these pieces of evidence we are forced to conclude that there is, at present, no cogent reason to think that there was a historical post-Roman Arthur. Instead he is best seen, like Fionn for the Gaelic regions, as a folkloric hero, living in the wilds of the landscape and protecting Britain from all kinds of supernatural threats, just as the vast majority of the evidence suggests.¹⁵ Indeed it is worth pointing out once more that the *Historia Brittonum*’s account of Arthur in Chapter 56 not only appears to include deeds of a number of earlier warriors such as Urien of Rheged and Ambrosius Aurelianus, but also identifiable mythical elements which have been historicised in this text – the possibly very early poem *Kat Godeu* would appear to be concerned with a mythical battle in which Arthur plays some (perhaps major) part and in which the trees of *Coed Celyddon* are magically animated to fight, thus showing the battle of *Coit Celidon* (‘the Caledonian

Forest') recorded in Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* in a very interesting light. Similarly, the 'battle on the bank of a river which is called Tribruit' in Chapter 56 of the *Historia* appears elsewhere, in the early *Pa gur yv y porthaur?* (which summarises a number of pre-existing Arthurian tales) as an entirely mythical battle against werewolves (With regards to the battles named in the *Historia Brittonum*, it should perhaps be emphasised that there is no reason to think that all of the battles used to historicise Arthur were real historical battles – at least some of the battles used to historicise Fionn seem to have been invented spontaneously for the purposes of historicisation and this could well be the case here (a fact that may well explain some of the problems in identifying the battles in *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56, see Padel, 1994: 21; Jackson, 1945-6)).

The above conclusions may well help explain certain puzzling features of the Arthurian legend, in particular the strange absence which has often been noted (*e.g.* Bromwich, 1978a: 274; Thomas, 1995: 389) of Arthur from the early Welsh genealogies. Such texts are perhaps best understood as dynastic 'propaganda' (see Dumville, 1977a; 1977b) and if Arthur was generally held to have been a great historical leader at the time of their compilation, his absence would be very puzzling; if, on the other hand, he was not viewed in this light but instead as a pan-Brittonic folkloric hero then his absence is entirely comprehensible (see Gowans, 1988 for a similar situation involving Cai). This notion, of a reluctance to use the name of a national folkloric hero, can also provide the only viable explanation of one of the first pieces of evidence examined here, that is the four (or five) occurrences of the name *Arthur* in sixth- and seventh-century contexts, as Padel has recently noted (1994: 24). Padel observes, as others have done before him, that all the occurrences of the name 'Arthur' are recorded in Gaelic sources and occur in the context of the Irish settlers in western Wales and Scotland (see Bromwich 1975-6; Barber, 1972) and he suggests that the absence of this name in British contexts is due to Arthur being regarded 'with exceptional awe' as a legendary hero and Protector of Britain, whilst the Irish 'when they came into contact with the folklore as a result of their settlements in western Britain, need not have felt such reverence or reluctance' (Padel, 1994: 24) and consequently they made use of this name (the date of adoption of this name would, of course, be dependent on complex cultural interactions and developments and thus the fact that it was not immediately adopted should not be seen as significant). As well as explaining satisfactorily all the available evidence this suggestion gains a considerable amount of credence from the fact that detailed study of the Welsh genealogical tracts reveals that not one single person of British descent in Wales bore the name 'Arthur' in the genealogies until the late sixteenth century at the earliest, a situation Bartrum suggests may well be because the name carried some sort of superstition with it (Bartrum, 1965). If Arthur was to be viewed as historical rather than legendary, then explanation of these three pieces of information (the absence of Arthur from the early royal genealogies; the sudden occurrence of four people named Arthur in the context of the Irish settlers in Wales and Scotland; the fact that not one single person in Wales of British descent can be shown to bear the name Arthur until at least the late sixteenth century) would be a very difficult problem.

Another 'puzzling' feature particularly worthy of note is the fact that, outside of the *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56, the *Annales Cambriae* (which is derivative of the *Historia Brittonum*), the possibly eleventh-century Breton *Life of Saint Goueznou* (which paraphrases the *Historia Brittonum*) and William of Malmesbury's twelfth-century *Gesta Regum* (which again paraphrases the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae*), Arthur is *never* associated in the whole body of pre-Galfridian literature with the post-Roman defeat of the Saxons – a very strange situation surely for one who is supposed to be famed *because* of such an association. However, it fits with the fact that there seems to be good reason to believe that there was a separate non-Arthurian tradition regarding the battle of Badon

(which, again, is only ever associated with Arthur in the few sources (above) that are directly derivative of the *Historia Brittonum* – in sources that are not connected with the *Historia*, Badon is not linked with Arthur nor is Arthur linked with Badon, see Bromwich, 1978a), the single event which puts Arthur’s supposed victories into the realms of history and which, in essence, defines his role as defeater of the Saxons. Both of these features, especially when taken together, appear highly suggestive. One has to ask, why, if the reason that Arthur was so honoured in Welsh tradition was that he led the British resistance and won the famous battle of Badon, this is ignored and even perhaps doubted by the ‘guardians of Welsh tradition’? Why, in the vast majority of cases, both early and late, did they instead paint a consistent picture of Arthur as a figure of folklore who was very similar indeed to the Gaelic Fionn, an entirely mythical figure who came to be historicised with great battles against the Viking invaders of Ireland? Indeed, one might further ask why, if Arthur was universally famous not for being a folkloric Protector of Britain but rather the defeater of the Saxons, the Cornish felt perfectly able to *totally* ignore his Saxon associations and instead historicise him into distant antiquity *and* into the period of the *Viking* incursions (see Hunt, 1881; Courtney, 1890)?¹⁶

Such considerations as those above, quite apart from the fact that the adoption of a sound methodology forces us to conclude that Arthur was in all probability a folkloric ‘Protector of Britain’, suggest that such an interpretation is the correct one.¹⁷ A historical fifth- or sixth-century Arthur is not in anyway necessary to the understanding of the pre-Galfridian Arthur and the evidence we have makes the postulation of such a figure not only unnecessary but also completely unjustifiable.

3. The Historicisation of Arthur

Whatever else Arthur is, he is a composite figure. Through the centuries the concept of Arthur did not stay the same – there is no ‘standard’ Arthurian legend as this legend is the result of Arthur attracting to himself both the deeds and characteristics of other tales and characters. This bears directly on the above question – we cannot conclude that there was no historical Arthur as there was, to the extent that certain texts, notably the *Historia Brittonum*, the *Annales Cambriae* and Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, have a concept of Arthur that is clearly historical. While the Arthur they portray cannot be seen, in light of the above, as the ‘original’, it is surely still a valuable exercise to inquire as to whose deeds were being later attributed to Arthur, as these deeds are an integral part of many later portrayals of Arthur and as such do constitute part of the origins of Arthur.

What then of the Arthur of *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56? While we might legitimately look for an ‘original’ for each of the battles, we also have to ask whether the whole concept presented in Chapter 56 of the *Historia* is based on a single figure. The prime candidate for this ‘honour’ has to be, naturally, Ambrosius Aurelianus. In Gildas’s *De Excidio Britanniae* Ambrosius is given prominence as the initiator of the British counter-attack which, after the fighting of several battles, culminates in the battle of Badon, just as Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum* initiates the British counter-attack which, after the fighting of several battles, culminates in the battle of Badon. On the basis of this we may well be able to say that, to some extent, we do have a historical Arthur – Ambrosius – in the sense that the concept of Arthur as a historical figure and the framework for historicisation was based on his deeds.¹⁸

With regards to the individual battles, this is perhaps more difficult. As noted in the preceding discussion, the ‘battle on the bank of a river which is called Tribruit’ and *Cat Coit Celidon* may well be actual Arthurian mythic battles. Others may be ‘real’ or they could be invented: Badon, as has been argued above, can be easily associated with

Ambrosius, just like the whole framework of historicisation, and *Breguoin* appears elsewhere in very early sources as a battle fought by Urien of Rheged. Others however could simply be made up, as is thought to be the case for the battles used to historicise Fionn in his battle-list and as has been suggested earlier in this study. The problem with undertaking any exercise of this kind is the fact that the names given to the battles could represent many areas – only a few can actually be called certain and on the basis of this list theories of a Southern Arthur, a Midland Arthur and a Northern Arthur have all been constructed. A partial solution is to split the list up into separate characters as above but it should be remembered that it can only be taken so far. The desire to identify these battles is often great but this should not prevent us from recognising that with sufficient ‘ingenuity’ they can be made to fit just about any area and many may not, in fact, be identifiable or even have identifications.

With regards to the whole question of historicity and historicisation, it has been suggested that, rather than ask whether there is any justification for postulating a historical Arthur, we should ask whether any candidate fits the ‘facts’ – certainly the undertaking of such an exercise is very beneficial but it probably doesn’t actually show anything, at least with regards to historicity. To take an example, several people have suggested, over the years, that Ambrosius is Arthur on the basis of *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56. However, what they see can be one of two things – either they are seeing the ‘truth’, that Ambrosius was Arthur, or they are seeing a partial truth, that the portrayal of Arthur in these sources was based on Ambrosius but that this is a secondary development of a folkloric Arthur; in a sense Ambrosius was Arthur but not in the sense that most people would mean when seeking an answer to this question. How does one get away from this? The only way I can see is by adopting the above methodology, by asking what justification there is for postulating a historical Arthur. Indeed, it should further be pointed out that there are certain dangers in looking for characters who ‘fit the facts’ – to take the example of Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* once more, with sufficient ‘imagination’ and linguistic gymnastics, as has been noted, the list of battles in this Chapter can be made to fit just about any locality one can think of and as such these theories are mutually cancelling and methodologically indefensible – thus Collingwood (1929) succeeded in ‘discovering’ all the battles in the south-east, which happily fitted his theory that Arthur only fought the Jutes; Anscombe (1904) ‘found’ that all the battles were fought in the Midlands; and Skene (1868: I, 52-58) ‘discovered’ that all the battles could be identified with places in Scotland! The above methodological considerations hold whether one is looking at models for historicisation or ‘Arthurian originals’ – a vast literature has been generated, both online and offline, by the search for historical characters who ‘fit the facts’ but the simple truth of the matter is that the vast majority of these efforts are methodologically indefensible. While internally consistent, these theories are all mutually cancelling, explain only a tiny portion of the legend, if any of it, and an almost infinite number of such identifications can be made (especially when a shot of ‘ingenuity’ is added to the mix), all impossible to disprove but equally nearly all invalid.

Another aspect of the Arthurian legend that has been much discussed is the Gallic invasion. This aspect of Arthur’s character first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the Breton *Life of Saint Goueznou* and *Culhwch ac Olwen* (though the reference in the latter is probably either Galfridian in origins or simple fantasy, see Bromwich and Evans, 1992: 58-59). Some, notably Geoffrey Ashe (1981; 1985; 1995) and C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor (1994), would see this as an original element of the Arthurian tradition. However, as Padel (1995: 109-10), Bromwich (1991: 5-6) and others have noted, there is nothing at all suggestive of such a notion of Arthur as a Gallic adventurer in the early insular sources (except for *Culhwch*, but see above) and therefore if it is an early element it should be seen as absent from the insular tradition and thus

continental in origin (as is suggested by its appearance in the Breton life). Perhaps the best explanation is to see the Gallic campaign as a non-insular (Breton?) historicisation of the pan-Brittonic folkloric Arthur in much the same way as suggested for *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56 but in this case with a composite remembrance of British campaigns on the continent – attention might be particularly drawn to Riotamus (on the basis of Ashe’s evidence) and the powerful legend of the Emperor Maximus, the Welsh *Maxen Wledig*, who was believed to have conquered Rome and afterwards to have left his troops as the first colonisers of Brittany, as candidates for such a ‘historicisation’.

4. The Origins of Arthur

The origins of Arthur are always going to be controversial. Given the above conclusion that there is no reason to believe that the concept of Arthur as a fifth-/sixth-century warrior is anything other than a secondary development of the legendary/mythical Arthur seen in (for example) *Preideu Annwfn*, *Pa gur yv y porthaur?*, *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 73 and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the origins of Arthur are essentially open. While many theories of origins, each internally consistent, can and probably will be constructed, at present there are two main theories for the origins of any legendary Arthur [though see now Green, 2007: chapter 5 for a thorough discussion].

The first has been supported over the years by Kemp Malone (1924-5), Oliver Padel (1994: 31; 1995: 111-12), and C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor (1994), and suggests that the second-century Lucius Artorius Castus is the original Arthur (see Malone, 1924-5 on this figure), though Padel supports this only very tentatively. Malone based his theory on the fact that the Latin personal name *Artorius* (‘plowman’) would have developed into *Art(h)ur* in the vernacular quite regularly (the long *o* of Latin loan-words regularly appears as *u* in Welsh and such endings as *-ius* are dropped, thus changing *Artorius* into *Art(h)ur*), and on the Gallic campaign as evidenced in Geoffrey of Monmouth. On the latter argument, one would have to say that not all would accept its validity, with alternative explanations being available for the existence of this element in Geoffrey’s work (see above). Therefore the case, as set out by Malone and nodded at by Padel, for Lucius Artorius Castus as the ‘original’ Arthur is, initially at least, based on the name alone. If the *Artorius* derivation is accepted as the only likely etymology of the name Arthur then this identification does seem to be the most reasonable and it would help explain the continental invasion tale (though it is not necessary to any such explanation). However, it requires us to see Arthur as a figure who was first of all historical, then became totally absorbed into Celtic folklore and then, at a later point, was historicised into a entirely different era from that in which he had his origins. Whilst not impossible, some might think it a little over complicated. In recent years though, an alternative argument in favour of Lucius Artorius Castus has emerged – Littleton and Malcor (1994) have argued that in post-Galfridian Romance a number of features can be discerned in the legend which could be Scythian in origins, and the only evidence of Scythians in Britain comes from the second century, when a group of Sarmatians were brought over to northern Britain as Roman cavalry by one Lucius Artorius Castus. Essentially the authors argue that the ‘most important’ of Arthurian figures and themes (which include, according to Littleton and Malcor, the sword in the stone, the Holy Grail and the return of Arthur’s sword to the lake), on the basis of the parallels they observe, originated in the culture of the nomadic horse-riding peoples who inhabited the Eurasian steppes, an area known as Scythia to the Romans and Greeks, and that they were imported into western Europe by two of these tribes, the Sarmatians and the Alans – in their eyes Arthur is simply a different name attached to the the legend of Batraz, the hero of the Scythian Narts tales

(Lancelot is seen in almost identical terms, with ‘Arthur’ being the insular British development of this Batraz, via the Sarmatians, and Lancelot the continental development, via the Alans).

Certainly such a view of the process is intriguing, the parallels identified are very interesting, and by simply having Lucius Artorius Castus give his name to a pre-existing folkloric cycle one can avoid the problems of having him as the origins of such a cycle (though one could object that he could have just as easily simply given his name to a pre-existing *insular Celtic* folkloric cycle, perhaps related to the Fionn cycle). The main problem with this theory is, however, the 1000 years of silent transmission of these Scythian folktales as central to the Arthurian legend that the authors require us to accept, both in Britain and on the continent – all the ‘Scythian’ elements appear in the post-Galfridian works, from Chrétien de Troyes onwards, and some of the most striking apparent parallels between the Arthurian legend and the eastern Batraz story make their very first appearances in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*! There is simply no trace of Lancelot in continental literature before Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century and none of the ‘most important of Arthurian themes’ are even hinted at in the reasonably large body of insular Arthurian traditions that we have preserved in *Culhwch, Pa gur?*, the Triads etc. – Arthur, as he appears in non-Galfridian tradition, looks like an entirely insular figure with an insular cycle (see Padel, 1994, 1995; Bromwich and Evans, 1992; Ford, 1983; Edel, 1983; etc.) and it is only in post-Galfridian materials that he gains what Littleton and Malcor see as the ‘essential elements’ of his legend when making him simply Batraz by another name (with regards to Lancelot, a large part of their thesis depends on, aside from 1000 years of silent transmission, their etymologising his name from *(A)lanx-lot*, ‘the Alan’s parcel of land’ etc., the validity of which has been questioned by a recent reviewer (Wood, 1995: 126)). Certainly the evidence that Littleton and Malcor present is highly suggestive of *some sort* of connection between the post-Galfridian Arthurian legend and Scythian legend but the parallels they observe should, in the absence of any evidence for its presence in non-Galfridian tradition in Britain and previous to the twelfth century on the continent, very probably be seen as late additions to the Arthurian legend, not elements that are both early and central to the tradition, whatever the ultimate origins of these elements are in western Europe (see Wadge, 1987 and Kennedy, 1995: 129-30 for alternative methods of transmission, including common Indo-European heritage). As such, the ‘evidence’ of Scythian parallels cannot realistically be used to support the theory that Lucius Artorius Castus supplied Arthur with his name and, consequently, this notion rests entirely on the derivation of *Art(h)ur* from the Latin *Artorius*.

The second theory represents a challenge to this by suggesting that, while the *Artorius* derivation of Arthur is perfectly acceptable, so too is a native derivation. Old Welsh *Arthur* would regularly develop in the vernacular from Brittonic **Arto-uuros*, ‘bear-man’ > Archaic Welsh *Art(u)ur* > *Arthur*, although for the Middle Welsh period and later we would have to rely on petrification in this form [something which is not entirely unheard of – see now Green, 2007: 190]. The suggestion of a native derivation gains additional support from the fact that, in Latin documents, the name ‘Arthur’ is always written *Art(h)ur/Art(h)urus* etc. and never in the form *Artorius* (the form *Art(h)urus* is, of course, fully in keeping with the British derivation as non-Latin names often had the normal ending *-us* added to give them a Latin appearance and to provide them with a basis for Latin case endings – thus British *Art(h)ur* would have been Latinised as *Art(h)urus*. It should of course be noted that, while suggestive, the absence of *Artorius* forms could simply reflect the total absorption of the name *Artorius* into pan-Brittonic folklore). A British origin for the name Arthur is further given credence by the frequent use of Welsh *art(h)* (‘bear’) figuratively to denote a warrior, thus making the name appropriate for a figure who is, in non-Galfridian tradition, a ferocious (bearlike?) fighter

and a ‘peerless military superhero’ (see Bromwich *et al*, 1991: 5-6; Griffin, 1994). The connection between Arthur and the bear was certainly made by medieval authors. Thus in the non-Galfridian Welsh poem *Ymddiddan Arthur a’r Eryr* (‘The Dialogue of Arthur and the Eagle’), Arthur is repeatedly described as ‘bear of men’ (*arth gnyr*), ‘bear of the host’, and so forth. Similarly the Sawley Glosses, which are marginal additions to a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century manuscript of the *Historia Brittonum*, comment that “‘Arthur’ translated into Latin means ‘horrible bear’...” (Coe and Young, 1995: 11). Finally, Rachel Bromwich has shown that that *Arcturus*, deriving from the Greek word for ‘Keeper of the Bears’ and denoting a bright star associated with the Great Bear (Ursa Major) constellation (see Rogers, 1998: 86; Griffen, 1994: 83-84), was a genuine non-Galfridian variant form of Arthur’s name,

and one for which there is good reason to believe there was traditional authority. *Arcturus*, like *Arctos* (=Ursa Major or ‘the bear’) was often used to denote the polar region, the far north, and there are references in Latin literature to the savage and tempestuous weather associated with the rising and setting of the star *Arcturus*. By extension, the name of the star gave rise to the adj. used by Lucan for the Gauls as *arctos gentes* ‘people of the (far) north’, *Bellum Civile* V, 661. To name a hero *Arcturus* could therefore be taken to imply that he belonged to the north (*i.e.* to north-west Europe), and that he was ‘bear-like’ in his characteristics. (Bromwich, 1978a: 544-45. See also Griffen, 1994: 82ff.)

The above references would appear to favour a native derivation and such a derivation would seem to be most in harmony with the nature of the pre-Galfridian Arthur as a pan-Brittonic legendary hero, a peerless warrior associated with local topographic folklore, avoiding the need to postulate the complicated scenario of having a historical figure totally mythicised and then historicised into a period with which he was previously unrelated.¹⁹ Indeed, even if we were to reject a derivation from Brittonic **Arto-uiros* on the basis of the need for petrification in the Old Welsh form, it needs to be remembered that other derivations than *Artorius* are still possible, some similarly involving Brittonic *Arto-*, ‘bear, warrior, hero’. In fact, even if the *Artorius* derivation is correct it may well not carry with it any implications of possible historicity, given the tendency for the Romanisation of nomenclature seen in both personal and divine names from Britain and Gaul, either through wholesale replacement or new suffixes [there is now a full discussion of all this in Green, 2007: 178-94].

If a derivation involving Brittonic *Arto-* is accepted as possible and fitting, one might point not only to the figurative uses of British *art(h)*, Brittonic *Arto-*, but also, very tentatively, to the evidence for Celtic ‘bear-cults’, including divinities such as *Dea Artio* (‘bear goddess’), *Andarta* (‘the powerful bear’), *Artgenos* (‘son of the bear god’) and *Artaios* (‘bearlike’) (Ford, 1986: 94; MacCulloch, 1911: 212-13; Ross, 1992: 434-35). With regards to this, it is interesting to note that many of the ‘bear-gods’ appear to have been forest gods (see Olmsted, 1994: 429-30, 431) – Arthur was associated from possibly a very early period with a mythical battle of the trees of the great Caledonian forest (in the poem *Kat Goden*) and his court, in pre-Galfridian tradition, was at *Kelli nic*, ‘forest grove’, though one wouldn’t wish to press this point. Whilst he need be no more than a legendary ‘hero’, there is no bar to Arthur actually having originally been a god, just as Fionn was (see Ó hÓgáin, 1988). It all depends on how far one is willing to go, though *if* Arthur was *originally* such a mythological figure then there may well be a more plausible divine origin for him than as a bear-god, and one which still explains the name [see Green, 2007: 229-40]. Indeed, mythologist Ann Ross has recently come out in support of Arthur originally being a ‘Celtic deity of an all purpose type’, a warrior and protective god – the ‘divine

protector’ – of the Britons, who closely paralleled the Gaelic Fionn (Ross, 2001: chapter 4).

There are, naturally, many other possible native derivations and mythological origins for Arthur that have been proposed over the years and which may, in the light of all the above, deserve re-examination, for example, Sir John Rhys’s championing of Arthur as a culture-hero (Rhys, 1891); Kemp Malone’s suggestion that Arthur and Uthr (the latter *was* a pre-Galfridian character) were one and the same person, both being a Celtic god (Malone, 1924); and the intriguing evidence for a folkloric belief that Arthur is a crow, raven or a Cornish Chough (‘a red-legged crow’). This latter is well-documented in the folklore of south-western Britain and Brittany (see Hunt, 1881: II, 308-09; Courtney, 1890: 58; Loomis, 1958: 16; Bruce, 1923: I, 34, n. 74), the earliest occurrences being in the 1582 Chronicle of Julian del Castillo and three times in the works of Cervantes,²⁰ casting some suggestive light on the *Y Gododdin* reference that ‘[Gorddur] used to entice down black ravens in front of the wall of the fortified town – though he was no Arthur’ and the possible derivation of Arthur’s name from *arrdhu* ‘very black’ (see MacKillop, 1998 and Spence, 1945: 146 [the connection with the crow/raven/chough may have a more plausible explanation than this, however – Green, 2007: 145-51, 237]). However, caution must once more be urged – just as an almost infinite number of *historical* prototypes for Arthur can be identified with enough enthusiasm, it seems very likely that a similar number of *mythical* prototypes can also be identified and, as such, the methodological comments made with regards to the identification of ‘historical Arthurs’ must be applied to this problem also.

5. Endnotes

¹ Another example of a non-historical personage who is often mistakenly thought to be historical is, as Geoffrey Ashe has recently pointed out (‘The Origins of the Arthurian Legend’, *Arthuriana*, 5.3 (1995), pp. 1-24 at p. 6), Sherlock Holmes: ‘He is so vivid that countless people have taken his existence for granted. For many years the office on the site of his Baker Street lodgings (not really identifiable, but given a street number) received a steady trickle of letters addressed to him... Yet we know how his saga began, and it was in Conan Doyle’s imagination, not in the biography of a real detective.’ It needs to be said that the above are only interesting *examples* of the historicisation of mythical/fictional characters and that the question of whether such historicisation occurs does not by any means rest on these few examples alone (or even primarily). That historicisation could and did happen is beyond doubt – not everything we are told by medieval authors about events many centuries in the past need be the complete ‘truth’, even if the authors themselves might have believed it.

² Only names in the form *Art(h)ur* and its Latinisations concern us here as they are the only relevant forms. The case is occasionally made (though not in academic literature) that all names with the element *art(h)* should be considered – this is, however, simply a very common personal and place name element (in early Gaul, Ireland and Britain) meaning ‘bear’ and, as such, there is absolutely no reason to think that there is any special relationship between the large number of names with *art(h)* as an element and the name *Art(h)ur* – they are all separate and distinct names. This important fact relates directly to a very recent find during the excavations at Tintagel of a sixth-century stone inscribed *PATER COLLAVI FICIT ARTOGNOV*, which translates as ‘Artognou, father of a descendant of Coll, has had (this) made/built/constructed.’ (*English Heritage press release*, Thursday, 6 August 1998; S. de Bruxelles, ‘Arthur: is this where myth meets history?’ in *The Times*, Friday, 7 August 1998, p. 5). English Heritage have chosen (despite the strong and perfectly understandable reservations of the archaeologists in charge of the dig) to milk this find for publicity by pushing the notion of an association between the names Arthur and Artognou – *Artognou* is, however, *not in any way* the same name as *Art(h)ur*; the only thing they have in common is the apparent presence of the very common personal- and place-name element *art(h)* (a relationship that the name *Art(h)ur* shares with many other names, from many different periods and places) and, as such, claims that this stone refer to a ‘historical Arthur’ are completely unjustified, a position which would seem to be in line with that taken by those scholars in the best position to evaluate the evidence: Chris Morris, in charge of the excavations, has (in an online statement made by the archaeologists rather than English Heritage) said

that ‘we must dismiss any idea that the name on this stone is in any way to be associated with the legendary and literary figure Arthur... As Professor Thomas states, ‘All this stone shows in the name ARTOGNOU, is the use of this (Celtic) element [art(h)].’” (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/Acad/Archaeology/>, Friday, 15 August 1998). The following sensible comment was posted on *alt.legend.king-arthur*:

I find it amusing that the news has already switched to claiming that the inscription mentions the name ‘Arthur’. There are any number of early Brythonic names with the initial element ‘Art(h)-’, including several examples of the name ‘Artgen’ (see Bartrum ‘Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts’), which contains the same basic elements as the inscription’s ‘Artognou’ except that the latter has the zero-grade form of the second element (see Evans ‘Gaulish Personal Names’ for ‘-gno-’). Unless the legendary Arthur wasn’t really named Arthur, I don’t see how the inscription can have anything to do with him. It’s a different name. (Heather Rose Jones, *alt.legend.king-arthur* posting, 07 August 1998 17:42).

It should also be noted that Adrian Gilbert, in *The Holy Kingdom* (London, 1998), has claimed that Arthwys, a king from southern Wales, is Arthur, on the assumption that *Arthwys* is the Welsh form of *Art(h)ur* and some highly dubious archaeological ‘finds’. This is demonstrably false, at least with regards to the name, as the Welsh form of *Art(h)ur* is very clearly *Art(h)ur!* Arthur is never referred to as *Arthwys* in vernacular sources and, indeed, ‘Arthwys’ is an entirely separate and well documented Welsh personal name that cannot be in any way associated with the name *Art(h)ur* or with the Latin name *Artorius* that is often assumed to lie behind the name Arthur, as asserted by Gilbert. Indeed, the correct form of the name is actually *Athwys*, not the more Arthur-like misspelling *Arthwys*, in any case.

³ The mid-seventh-century poem *Marnnad Cynddylan* refers to Arthur in much the same way as does *Y Gododdin*, this text implying that the military deeds of Cynddylan and his brothers are of such great valour that these warriors might be seen as *canawon Artur fras, dinas dengyn*, ‘whelps of great/stout Arthur, a mighty fortress’ (see R. Bromwich, ‘Concepts of Arthur’, *Studia Celtica*, 10/11 (1975-6), pp. 163-81 at p. 177; R. Bromwich *et al*, ‘Introduction’, in R. Bromwich *et al* (edd.) *The Arthur of the Welsh. The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 1-14 at p. 5; A.O.H. Jarman, ‘The Delineation of Arthur in Early Welsh Verse’, in K. Varty (ed.) *An Arthurian Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Lewis Thorpe* (Glasgow, 1981), pp. 1-21 at p. 4. ‘Fortress’, *dinas*, here has the sense of ‘defence, defender’). If this is accepted – Rowland in her *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: a Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 186, suggests an alternate reading for the text of the poem but this doesn’t seem to have gained general acceptance – then it shows that the concept of Arthur as a ‘peerless warrior’/‘superhero’ was present in East Powys (roughly modern Shropshire) in the seventh century (its contribution to the historicity debate would, of course, be the same as that of *Y Gododdin*, just discussed). Whatever the case, *Y Gododdin*’s concept of Arthur as the ‘paragon of military valour’ is clearly shared by other non-Galfridian Welsh sources too, such as the poems *Kadeir Teyrnnon*, *Gereint fil[ius] Erbin*, *Ymddiddan Arthur a’r Eryr*, and *Marnnat vthyr pen[dragon]*.

⁴ Whilst Charles-Edwards is right to point to similarities between the works of Bede and Paul the Deacon and the *Historia Brittonum*, the reputations of the former as ‘reliable’ historians are solely a result of the fact that they deal mainly with near-contemporary events. The author of the *Historia* was, however, dealing with events 300 years or more in the past and for such distant periods both Bede and Paul the Deacon are equally unreliable (see D.N. Dumville, ‘*Historia Brittonum*: an Insular History from the Carolingian Age’, in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (edd.) *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Wien/München, 1994), pp. 406-34 at pp. 418-19).

⁵ It is worth noting that it has been argued that the tale of Arthur carrying an icon of the Virgin Mary into battle – which is often taken as part of any hypothetical poem, most recently by Koch – must have had its origins in the ninth century and quite possibly in a monastic context (see R. Barber, *The Figure of Arthur* (London, 1972), p. 101ff.), like that in which the author of the *Historia* was working, implying at the very least a similar origin for the poem that supposedly contained it.

⁶ Howlett, in his book *Cambro-Latin Compositions, Their Competence and Craftsmanship* (Dublin, 1998), argues convincingly that the date A.D. 496 for Badon is inset into the Latin of early medieval texts as part of the Celtic-Latin tradition of Biblical style (see D.R. Howlett’s *The Celtic-Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* (Dublin, 1995) on this), with A.D. 540 being inset as the date that Gildas’s *De Excidio Britanniae* was completed.

⁷ It is sometimes claimed, deriving the name Arthur from the Welsh word *arth* ‘bear’, that Gildas does mention Arthur when he refers to Cuneglasus as *urse* – such an interpretation of Gildas is, however, wildly speculative and unacceptable (see K.H. Jackson’s ‘*Varia*. II. Gildas and the Names of the British Princes’,

Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies, 3 (1982), pp. 30-40 at pp. 32-34 for a full investigation of this passage, which is entirely understandable within the context of Gildas's text).

⁸ In fact, it is worth remembering that some of the unidentifiable names look like they may well have been invented, thus further casting doubt on the *Historia* (see K.H. Jackson, 'Once Again Arthur's Battles', *Modern Philology*, 43 (1945-6), pp. 44-57). A brief word should be said regarding the very many theories of a 'local' Arthur (a good example is W.G. Collingwood's 'Arthur's battles', *Antiquity*, 3 (1929), pp. 292-98) which have been based on the list of battles in Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum*. With sufficient 'imagination' and linguistic gymnastics the list of battles can be made to fit just about any locality one can think of and as such these theories are mutually cancelling and methodologically indefensible – thus Collingwood succeeded in 'discovering' all the battles in the south-east, which happily fitted his theory that Arthur only fought the Jutes; Anscombe ('Local names in the "Arthuriana" in the "Historia Brittonum"', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 5 (1904), pp. 103-23) 'found' that all the battles were fought in the Midlands and Skene (*The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Edinburgh, 1868), I, pp. 52-58) 'discovered' that all the battles could be identified with places in Scotland! Such conclusions can only increase our concerns regarding the contents of the *Historia*. For a scholarly and level-headed approach see Kenneth Jackson's articles 'Once Again Arthur's Battles', *Modern Philology*, 43 (1945-6), pp. 44-57; 'Arthur's Battle of Breguoin', *Antiquity*, 23 (1949), pp. 48-49; and 'The Site of Mount Badon', *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 2 (1953-8), pp. 152-55 (the site of Badon is much disputed though). Incidentally, it should be noted that Peter Field ('Gildas and the City of the Legions', *The Heroic Age*, 1 (1999)) has argued for an identification of the ninth battle differing from that which is usually accepted. Whilst an interesting suggestion, it is no more than a possibility and not necessarily the most plausible one. More importantly, even if it were to be accepted, his notions with regards to the nature of modern criticism of the *Historia Brittonum* and the significance of his suggestion to this cannot be endorsed.

⁹ This last point is, in fact, a very important one. If any investigation into the history of the post-Roman period in Britain is to have any validity at all (and appear acceptable to academic historians) then it must be done with a sound methodology. This impinges directly on the problem of Arthur in view of the fact that 'no contemporary or near-contemporary source makes any mention of him [Arthur]': Dumville has made the important observation that 'History must be written from contemporary sources or with the aid of testimony carried to a later era by an identified and acceptable line of transmission' or 'it will not be worth the paper it is printed on' (D.N. Dumville, *Histories and Pseudo-Histories of the Insular Middle Ages* (Aldershot 1990), X, 55); he rightly rejects 'the old foolish game of trying to write narrative history of an effectively pre-historic period with the aid of unhistorical and non-contemporary sources' (*ibid.*, IV, 4). As Chris Snyder has recently written, 'If you are trying to argue for an historical Arthur..., you cannot stray from the primary sources for the period: *i.e.* Patrick, the Gallic Chronicles, Constantius of Lyon, Gildas, etc. NONE of these sources mention Arthur. Therefore, building an Arthur theory by starting with later sources (*e.g.* 'Nennius,' the Welsh Annals, the Gododdin, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Welsh genealogies, Geoffrey of Monmouth) and then trying to argue backwards to Gildas and Badon is an unsound methodology according to modern historiographic principles.' (*Arthurnet* posting, 02 June 1998, 17:55).

¹⁰ With regards to the comment that 'our sources are simply not of the quality...', this refers exclusively to their value as historical sources for the post-Roman centuries. As Howlett has observed, 'The *Historia Brittonum* has received harsh criticism from modern historians,' but such criticism can deflect our attention from the intrinsic quality of the *Historia* as a text of the ninth century: 'His work shows that an early-ninth-century Welsh scholar could cope with the difficult sixth-century prose of Gildas... He could interweave multiple arithmetic features into his prose, each different from the others, each discretely perfect, none impeding or thwarting any other, none drawing attention to itself flamboyantly, all contributing to the harmony of a richly polyphonic narrative. The *Historia* has for a long time been misprised and undervalued. It is time now to read and appreciate it properly.' (D.R. Howlett, *Cambro-Latin Compositions, Their Competence and Craftsmanship* (Dublin, 1998), chapter 5).

¹¹ Such considerations have, to a large extent, led to the adoption of Dumville's concluding remarks on Arthur by academic historians, namely that 'The fact of the matter is that there is no historical evidence about Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books' ('Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend', *History*, 62 (1977), pp. 173-92 at p. 188), and Arthur is noticeably absent from (or dismissed in) the latest research concerned with the post-Roman period (for example, S. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London, 1989); A.S. Esmonde-Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (London, 1989); N.J. Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1992); K.R. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800* (London, 1993); B.A.E. Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995); C.A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants. Britain and the Britons A.D. 400-600* (Pennsylvania/Stroud,

1998)). Whilst Dumville's remarks may be a little harsh in places, even if one accepts the above 'perhaps' as a 'yes' then one can go no further: the evidence simply is not of the quality that it would allow us to say anything at all concrete about any possible historical Arthur. Charles Thomas perhaps summed up best the modern historian's attitude to such figures as Arthur, only recorded in very late and highly untrustworthy sources, when he wrote that 'Many will agree with Dr Dumville's *cri de coeur*: 'The fact of the matter is that there is no historical evidence about Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books.' Any sane person would agree. These enticing Will-of-the-wisps have too long dominated, and deflected, useful advances in our study.' (*Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), p. 245).

¹² In some ways Padel's approach to this problem is far preferable to my own and should be consulted by anyone at all interested in the question of Arthur. However, it was felt desirable to first provide a summary of the latest research into the texts that are usually turned to when looking at the 'historical Arthur' and make it clear that a historical Arthur cannot be assumed to have existed, before moving on to methodological issues etc.. Those already familiar with the methodological problems and Padel's important reassessment of the whole question will find much, of course, that is already familiar – I can only hope that a slightly different approach to the sources and a slightly fuller consideration of certain pieces of evidence and problems than Oliver Padel could give may be found to be of some small benefit to these readers.

¹³ That is to say, not localised in any particular region. That Arthur was pan-Brittonic from the very first is clearly evidenced in the pre-Galfridian material which places him in southern Scotland, south-western Britain, Wales and Brittany (see Padel, 'The Nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), pp. 1-14 for a demonstration of this) and is true even of the earliest references to him (the four or five people named 'Arthur' in the sixth and seventh centuries are to be found as far apart as south Wales and south Scotland, whilst *Marwnad Cynddylan* indicates a knowledge of Arthur in mid-seventh-century Shropshire).

¹⁴ It should also be noted that this folkloric Arthur not only dominates the pre-Galfridian material but also appears in the later works – he is clearly present in non-Galfridian Welsh tradition that post-dates Geoffrey's work and, indeed, he is also to be seen in Galfridian and post-Galfridian materials. To quote no less authorities than Gwyn and Thomas Jones, 'What of Arthur himself? His nature is unmistakable: he is the folk hero, a beneficent giant, who with his men rids the land of other giants, of witches and monsters; he undertakes journeys to the Otherworld to rescue prisoners and carry off treasures; he is rude, savage, heroic and protective... It is remarkable how much of this British Arthur has survived in the early twelfth-century *Historia* of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the mid-fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur* of Malory. Arthur setting off with Kaius and Bedeuerus to slay the swine-eating Spanish giant, and bursting out laughing when the monster crashes like a torn-up oak, or his battle with the beard-collecting Ritho, are cases in point... Behind the royal features in Geoffrey and Malory may be discerned the ruder lineaments of the folk hero...' (*The Mabinogion* (Dent 1949) p. xxv). It is in local folklore that the continuing dominance of this folkloric Arthur is most obvious however, as we might expect and as Padel has shown (see 'The Nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), pp. 1-31, in particular pp. 25-30. See also Grooms' *The Giants of Wales. Cewri Cymru*, Welsh Studies 10 (Lampeter, 1993)). Thus, for example, in Cornish folklore Arthur was, even as late as the nineteenth century, largely pre-Galfridian in nature, his name being attached to a large number of 'remarkable' topographic feature in just the same way as it was centuries before (with similar features that were not associated with Arthur being ascribed to giants) and Arthur was additionally renowned for ridding the area of the giants who compete with him for prominence in the topographic folklore (R. Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England. The Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, third edition (reprinted Felinfach, 1993), II, p. 307. This situation also existed within Welsh and Breton folklore, see C. Grooms, *The Giants of Wales. Cewri Cymru*, Welsh Studies 10 (Lampeter, 1993)).

¹⁵ This is not to say, naturally, that a historical post-Roman Arthur is disproved – one can only very rarely prove that a particular figure never existed (just as one can never prove that aliens did not assist in the building of the Pyramids or Silbury Hill). Rather what is being said is that, by the adoption of a sound methodology and the consequent viewing of the very few 'historical' references in the context that they must surely be seen in, the burden of proof is transferred from both parties in the debate over historicity to that which would argue that Arthur was a historical fifth-/sixth-century personage; it is not simply that a historical Arthur is not needed to understand the legend but rather that, in the absence of proof, the postulation of a historical post-Roman figure behind the pre-Galfridian material is completely unjustified and we must follow the vast majority of the evidence in seeing Arthur as a legendary figure. What we have to do is decide what is reasonable and what is not, and while Arthur *could have been* a real fifth-century personage, on present evidence there is absolutely no reason to think that he was. Of course, some will be

unwilling, despite the above, to let go of a historical Arthur for whatever personal reasons – in such circumstances one can only think of the following words by Bertrand Russell:

I wish to propose for the reader's favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear wildly paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true. I must, of course, admit that if such an opinion became common it would completely transform our social life and our political system; since both are at present faultless, this must weigh against it. (Bertrand Russell, *Skeptical Essays*, I (1928))

¹⁶ In Cornish oral tradition there is absolutely no trace of Arthur being renowned for fighting and defeating the Saxon invaders of post-Roman Britain – in fact he is not associated in any way with the Saxons. Rather he is renowned for defeating the Vikings in western Cornwall, on Vellan-drucher Moor (see R. Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England. The Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, third edition (reprinted Felinfch, 1993), I, p. 181, and II, pp. 305-08; M.A. Courtney *Cornish Feasts and Folklore* (1890), p. 74) and for driving the giants out of Cornwall in antiquity (this is, of course, in addition to the topographical folklore, of the type identified by Padel in his 'The Nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), pp. 1-31 that is present in Cornish folklore. Arthur was renowned for driving out the giants in Welsh oral tradition also – see C. Grooms, *The Giants of Wales. Cewri Cymru*, Welsh Studies 10 (Lampeter, 1993), pp. xlix-l). The first is obviously a historicisation of Arthur into a period many centuries after that which the more commonly read sources refer to; the latter may require a little more explanation. Whilst, first and foremost, it quite clearly reflects the 'original', legendary Arthur's folkloric role as giant-killer, it would also seem to represent a historicisation, as the belief that giants inhabited Britain before 'normal' humans (and that they had to be vanquished) is well evidenced both in, for example, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and Cornish and Welsh folklore (see, for example, C. Grooms, *The Giants of Wales. Cewri Cymru*, Welsh Studies 10 (Lampeter, 1993), Introduction) – thus the association of Arthur with this vanquishing of the giants is, at least partly, a historicisation of Arthur into distant antiquity.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Ashe ('The Origins of the Arthurian Legend', *Arthuriana*, 5.3 (1995), pp. 1-24) has given several reasons why, in his opinion, Arthur has to be historical. These have been dealt with in full by Padel in his commentary on Ashe's article in the same journal ('Recent Work on the Origins of the Arthurian Legend: A Comment', *Arthuriana*, 5.3 (1995), pp. 103-14), who has shown that they do not offer anything like the proof of historicity that Ashe suggests they do.

¹⁸ It is occasionally asked whether it is likely that the victor of an important battle such as Badon might be replaced, after several centuries, by someone else. In answer to this, four points need to be made. Firstly, the historicisation of legendary/mythical figures is, as has already been noted, often achieved through the association of these figure with some major event of the past. For instance, Hengest and Horsa were given as an example of mythical personages historicised at the beginning of this study and these were dioscuric horse-gods who were historicised with nothing less than a pivotal role in the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England by the eighth century, replacing the likely original players in this event (see, for example, D.J. Ward, *The Divine Twins, A Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition*, University of California Folklore Studies vol. 19 (1969); D.P. Kirby *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1991))! As such, the replacement of an original victor of (or player in) a major battle/event by a mythical/legendary character in the centuries after this occurred is not in any way implausible. Secondly, Badon is not the only battle that is suspected of being attributed to Arthur in *Historia Brittonum* chapter 56 but originally fought by someone else, the significance of which should be obvious. For example, Arthur's supposed battle of *Breguoin* would seem to have been a battle originally won by Urien of Rheged but attributed to Arthur by the ninth century, with Urien being a very important figure of early Welsh literature (see O.J. Padel, 'The Nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 27 (1994), pp. 1-31 at p. 18; K.H. Jackson, 'Arthur's Battle of Breguoin', *Antiquity*, 23 (1949), pp. 48-49; R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', *Studia Celtica*, 10/11 (1975-6), pp. 163-81). Thirdly, as was demonstrated earlier in this study, the association of Badon with Arthur is present only in a very few sources, all of which would seem to be ultimately derived from the *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56. Indeed, as was also earlier noted, there are good reasons to believe in the existence of early medieval traditions regarding Badon which did not associate it with Arthur and which were originally more widely acknowledged than the those that did. In light of this it is clear that any replacement that occurred was not by any means universally accepted.

Finally, there is the question of the status of the Battle of Badon. Historians are used to giving it a pivotal role in the history of post-Roman Britain, based on the fact that Gildas mentions this battle and no other. Whether this is justified or not is to be debated, given that Gildas dates it by saying that it was fought in the year of his birth. However, even if it was pivotal, we have to acknowledge that the Britons of

later centuries were not inclined to view it as particularly significant. Whilst non-Arthurian Welsh sources do mention Badon (though not in association with Arthur), as a whole it was clearly not seen as that important. Their main interest was rather with the sagas of later sixth- and seventh-century heroes such as Urien of Rheged and Badon is rarely mentioned (see R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Welsh Triads*, second edition (Cardiff, 1978)). Probably the most interesting evidence comes from the poem *Armes Prydein*, composed in the tenth century and in which the creation of a confederacy (of the Welsh, the Irish, and the men of Strathclyde, Cornwall, Brittany and Dublin) to defeat the ‘English’ is both advocated and prophesied. This featured a number of important people from the past designed to rally the Britons and their allies against the Anglo-Saxons, including the seventh-century Cynan and Cadwaladr, who are expected to return to lead the Britons in their confederacy, but neither Badon itself nor the victor of Badon (be he Ambrosius or Arthur) gets any mention whatsoever, surely a damning comment on the place of this much lauded victory against the Saxons in the British consciousness at this point (roughly the same point that it is suggested that Arthur’s name becomes attached to the battle of Badon). Given all the above, it can be concluded that the replacement of Ambrosius as victor of Badon by Arthur in a few texts all related to the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* is in no way implausible.

¹⁹ As Kemp Malone long ago wrote, ‘It will not do to take the name Arthur in all isolation, and look for a phonetically possible etymology. We must consider the name in connexion with the entire body of Arthurian material. The etymology which fits with this material is the etymology that we must adopt.’ (K. Malone, ‘The Historicity of Arthur’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 23 (1924), pp. 463-91 at p. 468).

²⁰ The earliest mention comes from a Spanish Chronicle of 1582 which asserts that it was common talk (*fama cumun*) that Arthur had been enchanted to the form of a crow and that many penalties were inflicted on anyone who killed one of these birds. Cervantes also refers to this belief three times in his *Don Quixote* (Vol. 1, 1605; Vol. 2, 1615) and his posthumously published *Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617). The following quote from R. Hunt’s nineteenth-century *Popular Romances of the West of England. The Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, third edition (reprinted Felinfach, 1993), II, pp. 308-09, based itself largely around an eighteenth-century note, brings some of these elements together nicely:

I quote the following as it stands:– [from *Notes and Queries*, vol. viii, p. 618]

“In Jarvis’s translation of ‘Don Quixote,’ book ii. chap. v., the following passage occurs:–

“‘Have you not read, sir,’ answered Don Quixote, ‘the annals and histories of England, wherein are recorded the famous exploits of King Arthur, whom, in our Castilian tongue, we always call King Artus; of whom there goes an old tradition, and a common one, all over the kingdom of Great Britain, that this king did not die, but that, by magic art, he was turned into a raven; and that, in process of time, he shall reign again and recover his kingdom and sceptre, for which reason it cannot be proved that, from that time to this, any Englishman has killed a raven?’

“My reason for transcribing this passage is to record the curious fact that the legend of King Arthur’s existence in the form of a raven was still repeated as a piece of folklore in Cornwall about sixty years ago. My father, who died about two years since, at the age of eighty, spent a few years of his youth in the neighbourhood of Penzance. One day he was walking along Marazion Green with his fowling piece on his shoulder, he saw a raven at a distance and fired at it. An old man who was near immediately rebuked him, telling him that he ought on no account to have shot at a raven, for that King Arthur was still alive in the form of that bird. My father was much interested when I drew his attention to the passage which I have quoted above.

“Perhaps some of your Cornish or Welsh correspondents may be able to say whether the legend is still known among the people of Cornwall or Wales. EDGAR MACCULLOCH

“Guernsey.”

I have been most desirous of discovering if any such legend as the above exists... Nowhere do I find the raven associated with him, but I have been told that bad luck will follow the man who killed a Chough [a red-legged crow], for Arthur was transformed into one of these birds.

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