

Lincolnshire and the Arthurian Legend

Thomas Green

Introduction

ARTHUR: *How do you do, good lady? I am Arthur, King of the Britons. Whose castle is that?*
WOMAN: *King of the who?*
ARTHUR: *The Britons.*
WOMAN: *Who are the Britons? (From Monty Python and the Holy Grail, 1975, Scene III)*

In all but the most eccentric theories about the origins of Arthur it is agreed that he was indeed a Briton, be he a real or imaginary one. Sometimes he is an emperor; more often he is a king, or a general, of the Britons. But inevitably the question follows, which Britons? Who were the Britons that he supposedly led? The following article suggests that, if Arthur existed at all, then the answer to this question might be the Britons of Lincolnshire.

This is, of course, something of a departure from orthodox theories of Arthur but, unlike many of these popular theories, this conclusion follows from a consideration of the latest historical and archaeological research. It has its genesis both in research into the Late Roman and Early Medieval East Midlands and a critical examination of hypotheses regarding the historical reality of the most famous legendary inhabitant of Britain during this period (Green, 2004). From the latter study several key themes emerged, which are elaborated upon and discussed below. What was particularly striking, however, was the almost complete unwillingness of theorists who believe that there actually was a historical Arthur to address one possibility for his area of operations that appears in even the earliest sources that refer to him as a figure of history: specifically, Lincolnshire. This article aims to rectify this, proceeding from the widely-held assumption of the existence of a genuinely 'historical Arthur', before going on to consider the even more fundamental question of whether we ought to believe in Arthur's existence at all.

The Arthur of the *Historia Brittonum*

Before we can even begin to consider where any possible historical Arthur may have been based, if he existed, some basic facts must be established. The earliest sources to feature Arthur as a historical figure place him in the period around the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century AD. Specifically, he is placed at the Battle of Badon Hill, an event that is also mentioned (though Arthur himself is not) by the contemporary writer Gildas in his *De Excidio Britanniae* § 26. Though the date of this event is much debated, it can for our purposes be placed with a reasonable degree of confidence in c.500 AD (see Sims-Williams, 1983; Lapidge and Dumville (edd.), 1984; Higham, 1994; Howlett, 1998. Snyder, 1998: 45, 280-1, has a good summary of recent opinions and their merits).

The first source with an indisputably historical concept of Arthur is the *Historia Brittonum* of 829/30 AD, often wrongly attributed to one Nennius (see further on it Dumville, 1974, 1975-6, 1986 and 1994). Arguably the *Historia* is the only historical source that is of any value to researchers, given that it is the most detailed of the early sources and later sources add little of historical import, often appearing derivative of it

(Charles-Edwards, 1991; Koch, 1996: 252-3; Green, 1998; Higham, 2002: 201-02; Green, 2007a, chapter 1). It opens its Arthurian section, §56, with the following statement:

Then Arthur fought against them [the Anglo-Saxon invaders] in those days, together with the kings of the Britons, but he was their battle leader [*dux bellorum*]. (Koch and Carey, 2003: 299)

Arthur is clearly here conceived of as a great warrior, but not necessarily as a king (though this is not explicitly excluded: Jackson, 1959: 9; Snyder, 2005), who won fame through fighting the Anglo-Saxon invaders. Some have seen in this an Arthur who is the leader of *all* the Britons against the invaders, a 'general commanding a combined British force' (Alcock, 1971 and 1972: 15-17), with Arthur and his army riding around Britain and fighting in places as far apart as Bath and southern Scotland (based on the identifications of the twelve battles subsequently assigned to Arthur by the author of the *Historia*). Such a notion is however rejected by most modern researchers for a variety of reasons, including both the fact that it is implausible in the historical context of the time and given the nature and reliability of the *Historia* itself and its battle list (for example, Jackson, 1959: 7-8; Bromwich, 1975-6: 168ff.; Charles-Edwards, 1991, especially pp.24-5 and 28; Green, 1998 and 2004). In consequence, if we are to have a historical Arthur underlying the *Historia Brittonum*, he must be seen as a character of regional, not national, influence who fought the Anglo-Saxons c.500 AD.

The Locality of Arthur in the 'Historical' Sources

In light of the above, the question must therefore become in which (if any) region do the historical sources suggest that Arthur operated, if we are to believe that he genuinely existed and that any coherent information about a single historical figure can be retrieved from the *Historia Brittonum* (on which assumptions, see further below and Green, 2007a). Modern historians do not, it should be remembered, have an overly high opinion of the *Historia* as a repository of accurate information. Written over 300 years after Arthur supposedly lived and with its own agenda, its testimony must be treated with extreme caution (see especially Hanning, 1966; Dumville, 1986 and 1994; Higham, 2002; Green, 2007a: 15-38). What that testimony consists of is a list of twelve battles that the author of the *Historia* ascribes to Arthur.

When it comes to using these to locate a single historical Arthur, any brief survey of the various theories that have been propounded will show one thing very clearly: the vast majority of these theorists lack caution. They set out to find Arthur and his battles in a particular place and, lo and behold, here they declare him (and them) found. Collingwood (1929) sought an Arthur who fought Hengest and the Jutes in the south-east, and find him he did. Skeat (1868, I: 52-8) thought Arthur should reside in the Scottish borders, and there indeed he was found. But this is not the worst of it – in order to make these identifications their authors frequently indulge in a wilful ignorance of philology. Many of the battle sites in the *Historia* are highly obscure and some cannot be identified if we adhere to sound scholarship; others do have secure identifications, which have been thoroughly and comprehensively investigated by one of the greatest Celticists of the past century, Kenneth Jackson (see Jackson, 1945-6; 1949; 1958). Many theorists, however, prefer to either indulge in logic of the type 'X *sounds* like Tribruit, so X *is* Tribruit' or to make huge leaps in the translation and interpretation of the names in order to get them to fit places in the locality they are interested in.

If the case for Arthur operating in the Lincolnshire region required such tactics then this article would have made it no further than idle speculation. Happily it does not. In fact, the very idea of such a case has its genesis in the fact that the identification of the site of Arthur's second, third, fourth and fifth battles, by the river called *Dubglas* 'which is in the country of *Linnuis* (*in regione Linnuis*)', is one of the few identifications that is secure and based on good philology: *Linnuis* is Lindsey, the northern part of Lincolnshire.

Lindsey has existed as a distinct unit within Lincolnshire for centuries and in the seventh century it was an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom in its own right, with Lincoln probably its chief settlement (Eagles, 1989; Foot, 1993). Historical, archaeological and etymological evidence all further suggests that this unit was the successor, in turn, to an earlier British post-Roman polity based around the Roman *civitas* territory of Lincoln (Leahy, 1993; Yorke, 1993; Green, forthcoming and below). The name of this post-Roman polity survived in the Old English kingdom-name that became modern Lindsey, *Lindesige*, which derives from the Late British folk-/territory-name **Lindēs*, 'the people of Lincoln' plus Old English *ig/eg*, 'an island' (Jackson, 1953: 332, 543; Cameron, 1991: 2-7; Gelling, 1989. **Lindēs* derives from Romano-British **Lindenses*, of the same meaning). Lindsey is thus the regular English development of **Lindēs*; the *regio* *Linnuis* – the 'country of *Linnuis*' – of the *Historia Brittonum* is simply the regular Old Welsh development of the same name (**Lindēs* > Archaic Welsh **Linnēs* > Old Welsh *Linnuis*, and thus not 'a garbled rendering of a word meaning the people of... Lincoln', as Reavill, 2003, suggests).

The importance of this should be clear – no speculation is necessary with regards to other, hypothetical, post-Roman **Lindēs* that could produce the *Historia's* *Linnuis*, as we have in the name 'Lindsey' certain evidence for **Lindēs* actually being used as a significant region-name in post-Roman Britain. Given this we can say that, at the very least, it was thought in the ninth century that Arthur fought at least one battle in Lindsey (the four battles said to have taken place here could reflect the river *Dubglas* in Lindsey being a particularly contested location, but it is more likely that they are duplications made by the author of the *Historia* for stylistic reasons, see Hanning, 1966: 119-20). Where exactly these battles were fought within Lindsey is open to dispute, however, as no river *Dubglas*, 'Blue-black (water)', now exists. Perhaps this is unsurprising – most Lincolnshire rivers have been renamed since the fifth century. I would suggest, however, that Reavill's reasoning is probably correct when he tentatively identifies it as an alternative name for the Witham, on account of the peaty composition of the soil it flows through (Reavill, 2003: 4).

We thus have a secure basis for building a theory of a Lindsey Arthur around, and one based on the earliest and best source for information on any historical Arthur. From this relatively solid foundation we can now look again at the other possible identifications of battles in the *Historia Brittonum* list. We know that at least one battle, and perhaps four, ascribed to Arthur in the ninth century was supposed to have been fought in Lincolnshire. Given the above conclusion that any historical Arthur, assuming he existed, was unlikely to be a figure that fought all across Britain, the question can now be legitimately asked, could any of his other supposed battles have taken place here?

The most famous battle is, of course, Badon; the culmination of Arthur's campaign in the *Historia* and the only battle whose existence – though not Arthur's involvement – is confirmed by an early and trustworthy source (Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* of c.540 AD). Could this too have been fought in the Lincolnshire region? Surprisingly for such a significant victory its location has long been disputed – Bath is one possibility (Burkitt and Burkitt, 1990) but it is by no means a certainty. Jackson (1958) and Gelling (1988: 60-1) have convincingly argued that it could equally well be

one of several sites whose name seems to derive from OW *Badon* + OE *byrig/burb*. Most of these are located in southern England, such as Badbury Rings in Dorset, leading to a wide consensus that this is where Badon was fought. However, there is no sound basis to this, other than the fact that this is where the majority of possibilities are found. There is, in fact, one often overlooked alternative: Baumber, near Horncastle in Lindsey, is also considered to be a possible *Badon* + *burb*, taking the form *Badeburg* in the Domesday Book (Gelling, 1988: 60-1; Cox, 1997-8).

Strictly speaking there is no reason why Baumber should be any less likely as a candidate for Badon than any of the others; all rest almost exclusively on etymological arguments. Certainly, as we will see below, the historical context of Lindsey c.500 AD is no less plausible a place for a battle between Britons and the immigrants than, say, Bath. Indeed, it should be born in mind that nearby Horncastle, a fortified Roman 'small town', is considered to be part of the Late Roman defenses of the east coast and 'one of the leading settlements in the Lincoln area' (Field and Hurst, 1983: 85), so a battle at Baumber would not be at all implausible. In this context it may be worth noting that the second element, *burb*, indicates that there was a fortification of some sort – the literal meaning of Old English *burb* – at Baumber in the early Anglo-Saxon period at least, when most Lincolnshire names involving this element were coined (Cox, 1994). A find of an Anglo-Saxon sword pommel dated to c.450-500 AD from Baumber may or may not be relevant here (Lincolnshire Sites and Monuments Record, PRN 43147; there have been no detailed archaeological investigations within the parish).

Of course, Badon does not have to be Baumber. However, if we are to see *Linnuis* and Badon as genuinely Arthurian battle sites, then their potential proximity might well be seen as significant, particularly given the fact that *Linnuis* is one of the few securely identifiable battles sites in the *Historia* and the current academic rejection of 'wide-ranging' Arthur theories.

Aside from Baumber we might also mention Arthur's first battle in the *Historia*, said to have been fought at 'the mouth of the river which is called *Glein*'. This is etymologically identical to the river Glen in south Lincolnshire and an equation is often made between the two (Jackson, 1945-6). However it must be remembered that *Glein* is simply an Old Welsh word meaning 'pure or clear (water)', and there is at least one other river in England (in Northumberland) that bears this name. Nonetheless, in light of the above considerations, this coincidence of another of the *Historia*'s battle-names in Lincolnshire is interesting and arguably the historical context for such a genuine late fifth or early sixth century battle in Lincolnshire – if we are to treat the battle on the *Glein* as such – is far better than that in Northumberland (see below). Indeed, it is worth noting that the Lincolnshire Glen appears to have been canalized by the Romans and may well have been a particularly tempting entry-point for the region, something confirmed by fifth- and sixth-century archaeological finds from around the point that the river exits the dry, higher ground to flow into the Fens towards the Wash (Hayes and Lane, 1992: 146-8; 159-61).

Finally we should note the ninth battle, fought at the City of the Legions (*urbs Legionis*). Again it is one of those battles which can, at least potentially, have their locations identified. Obviously this cannot have been fought in Lincolnshire as there was no *urbs Legionis* in the area. Most frequently it is identified with Chester and considered to be an intrusion into the Arthurian battle-list, borrowed from a battle fought there in 616 AD (Jackson, 1945-6; 1959). Such borrowings are a frequent occurrence in Welsh battle-lists and this is a convincing interpretation (see Bromwich, 1975-6 on this mechanism). Nevertheless, recently the possibility has been raised that *urbs Legionis* may in fact have been York, not Chester, though this is hotly contested (Field, 1999; Green, 2007a: 209). If it could be accepted, this proposition certainly has a

better historical context for a real battle of c.500 AD, and its proximity to Lincolnshire is suggestive for the theory being set out here.

Overall we can sum up as follows. Without any special pleading it is clear that four of Arthur's battles (though there may have been some duplication) were considered to have been fought in Lincolnshire in the first half of the ninth century. From this secure basis, and in light of a rejection of fanciful notions of a historical Arthur riding around the whole of Britain fighting the invaders from Bath to Scotland, the possibility has to be considered that the other battles with less secure identifications may have also been fought in this region, if we are to believe that Arthur existed and the *Historia* can tell us anything useful about him. In fact, as we have seen, there is potential for as many as three of the other battles to be identified either in Lincolnshire or close-by it, including the important Battle of Badon which seems (in the *Historia*) to be the climax of Arthur's 'career' and the reason for his fame. Of the remaining five battles, three are completely unidentifiable by sound philology, one is probably borrowed from Urien of Rheged (*Breguoin*, the eleventh battle, fought at High Rochester in the north-west of England, is ascribed to Urien in a potentially sixth-century Taliesin poem – Jackson, 1949; Bromwich, 1975-6: 171-2) and the last, *Cat Coit Celidon* – the 'Battle of the Caledonian Forest' – is probably either the misattribution to Arthur of the late sixth-century Battle of Arthuret or a mythical conflict given a false historicity (Padel, 1994: 18; Green, 1998; Green, 2007a: 62-7).

Obviously the case is not beyond doubt – Badon could easily not be Baumber but somewhere else entirely (Burkitt and Burkitt, 1990, have made a good case for Bath), as too could *urbs Legionis* and *Glein*. However, once again, if *Linnuis* is Lindsey and a wide-ranging Arthur is rejected, then the possibility that these identifications are correct and of Arthur at least mainly operating in the Lincolnshire and East Yorkshire region is an attractive one, based on the evidence we have. Of course, this only works if we make certain assumptions about the battle-list of the *Historia Brittonum*, namely that it represents the victories of a genuinely historical figure and – most importantly – that, whilst it may have borrowed battles from other leaders and mythology, at its core there is an accurate record of a single leader named Arthur who fought the Anglo-Saxons c.500 AD. This is open to very serious debate (see below and Green, 1998 and 2007a). Nevertheless, if we allow these assumptions then it does seem that a potential case exists for seeing this single leader as operating in the region around the Humber. Two further questions must consequently be asked. First, whether the other early Arthurian literature provides any clues that can allow us to reject or further support this hypothesis. Second, whether an Arthur based around the Humber has a convincing historical context.

The Locality of Arthur in the Legendary Sources

It is an undeniable fact that there is vastly more 'legendary' material on Arthur than there is 'historical', and arguably some of this does pre-date the *Historia Brittonum*. It would consequently be remiss if we did not look to this to further our understanding of the origins of any possible historical Arthur. In doing so we are in good company, for such an approach is that adopted by Rachel Bromwich in her important but underused survey of the Arthurian question (Bromwich, 1975-6). Bromwich sets out persuasively a case for considering the Welsh and Cornish versions of the Arthurian legend to be secondary developments. Instead she identifies the legendary Arthur as originally being a hero of *Y Gogledd*, the British 'Old North' (that is northern England and southern Scotland). She proposes that Arthur's later, wider, fame can be set in the context of the well-established movement of early traditions concerning Northern heroes such as Urien of Rheged and

Llywarch Hen south to Wales by 'at least as early as the ninth century' (Bromwich, 1975-6: 180).

Two pieces of evidence are particularly important in supporting this viewpoint. The first piece is the Arthurian reference in the poem *Y Gododdin*, ascribed to Aneirin. In recent years there has been much written about the statement there that the warrior Gwawddur 'fed black ravens on the rampart of a fort, though he was no Arthur' (B².38). The poem itself is the tale of a battle at Catraeth (Catterick) fought in the late sixth century and it has often been considered to have been composed c.600 AD in the 'Old North' (Jackson, 1969; Jarman, 1988). Whether the Arthurian stanza belonged to this original core is, however, very much debated. Koch has recently undertaken a major study of the poem and included the stanza in his reconstruction of the pre-638 text. On the other hand, his conclusions have not been accepted by all commentators, some of whom would prefer a ninth- or tenth-century dating for the stanza (Koch, 1996: 242-5 and 1997; Padel, 1998; Isaac, 1999. See Green, 2007a: 13-5, 50-2 for a thorough discussion of this poem, its dating and import). If Koch is right – and he has as many supporters as detractors – then this is extremely valuable to our present interests. Even if he is not, the reference is still potentially as old as that found in the *Historia Brittonum*. Whatever the case, as Jarman has noted, *Y Gododdin* is a very self-contained and insular work, concerned largely only with the 'Old North', and thus the mention of Arthur in it has been seen as implying that he was of that region (Jarman, 1989-90: 17-20; cf. Green, 2007a, 13-5, however).

One other key piece of evidence that ought to be referenced here is the fact that three or four people living in the 'Old North' were named Arthur in the second half of the sixth century and the first quarter of the seventh century. None of these people can be seen as the 'true' Arthur, as Bromwich and others have made very clear, and what exactly these names signify is unclear (Bromwich, 1975-6: 178-80; Padel, 1994: 24; Dark, 2000; Dooley, 2005; Green, 2007a). However, it does seem clear that they must reflect in some way a very early local knowledge and interest in Arthur, which Bromwich and her supporters interpret as further support for Arthur having his origins in the 'Old North'.

Other evidence that is often brought to bear includes the fact that the battle list in the *Historia Brittonum* may have its origins in the 'Old North' too, rather than in Wales like the rest of the text (Bromwich, 1975-6: 174-6). Dumville (1986) has argued strongly against this notion of a separate 'Northern History' being incorporated into the *Historia* but it has been supported recently by both Davies (1982: 205-6, 244) and Koch (1996: 247-8; 1997; 2006: 120). If accepted this would obviously strongly support the notion of a Northern Arthur and the idea that the battles, if we believe them to genuinely belong to an Arthur who really existed, are to be found in northern, not southern, England.

So far we have talked of the 'Old North' in general but this does perhaps need closer definition if the arguments above are to have a particular applicability to our interest in an Arthur who might have fought in Lincolnshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire. The 'Old North' is usually said to include the entire area from the Humber up to Edinburgh, and most of the evidence marshalled for Arthur as a hero of the 'Old North' has its immediate origins in the most northerly portions of this region. Bromwich has argued that this, however, simply reflects the fact that, by the time the Arthurian legend is written down and recorded, this is the only portion of the 'Old North' still in British hands. Anglian invaders conquered the southernmost portions to create the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia during the sixth century and so the far north is the only place where memories of a Northern Arthur could survive and be celebrated (Bromwich, 1963). In support of this, Bromwich suggests, the *Gododdin* reference to Arthur should be read as implying 'that Arthur was regarded as the adversary in a

previous generation of the same enemies as those who opposed Mynyddawg's force at Catraeth [Catterick], that is the 'early Anglian raiders and settlers in the East Riding [of Yorkshire], who were in the process of laying the foundations of the kingdom of Deira' (Bromwich, 1978: 275).

This is, of course, of the utmost importance in the present context. One of the most widely respected academic account of the early origins of the Arthurian legend points to 'the south-eastern corner of the 'Old North', that is... the East Riding of Yorkshire and possibly...York itself' as the area in which this legend originated (Bromwich, 1975-6: 180; also Bromwich, 1963). Indeed, of all the 'Old North' this is really the only area that can fit with the archaeological and historical evidence in providing a plausible context for any historical Arthur, as only here do we see Anglian immigration and activity in the late-fifth century on the kind of scale that make stories of a British war-leader famed for fighting the invaders, with a climax *c.*500 AD, plausible (see for example Dumville, 1989; Hines, 1990; and Higham, 1992).

This does, of course, tally very nicely with the evidence of the *Historia Brittonum* as discussed previously. Both the historical and the legendary material point to the area around the Humber as the region of operations for any historical Arthur. In particular, if *urbs Legionis* can be seen as York, as Field (1999) has argued, then the fit with Bromwich's survey of the Arthurian legend is close indeed. Obviously, once again, it is worth remembering that certain assumptions have been made in reaching these conclusions (that the *Historia Brittonum* has a core of fact relating to the victories of a historical figure named Arthur). If these are allowed then the evidence does seem to point towards Arthur having his base of operations in Lincolnshire or the East Riding of Yorkshire, with him fighting *c.*500 AD the Anglian invaders whose presence in significant numbers is indicated by cremation cemeteries such as Sancton (East Riding), Cleatham, South Elkington/Louth and Old Bolingbroke (Lincolnshire, the latter near to Horncastle).

The Historical Context

No matter how ingenious the theory of a historical Arthur, it must fit within the context of the period. Arthur's only claim to historical fame is that he fought and defeated the invading Anglo-Saxons. All other claims – imperial and foreign adventures; cataclysmic battles with internal, British, enemies – belong to the legendary Arthur and do not appear in the earliest sources (Camlann, for example, would seem to have its origins in the development of the Arthurian legend, not history: Charles-Edwards, 1991: 25-7, 28; Green, 2007a: 75-7). In light of this, Arthur must be placed in a context that would allow him to do this *c.*500 AD, if we are to accept the *Historia* as a source of any value. This too is something that many theorists forget when they try to locate Arthur in Cornwall, North Wales or Scotland. So the question must now be, does Lincolnshire provide a convincing context for a late-fifth-century British war-leader?

At the most basic level, as was noted above, the answer must be 'yes'. The East Riding of Yorkshire is the northernmost limit of significant fifth-century settlement and Lincolnshire is, along with East Anglia, one of the most heavily settled areas of Britain, with a large number of cremation cemeteries each containing up to 2000 burials and beginning during the fifth century (Leahy, 1993: 36). As such Lincolnshire would seem to be just the kind of area that we might expect an Arthur-like figure to be operating in.

Looking in more detail at the nature of this settlement, there is a whole host of archaeological, historical, and etymological evidence that suggests that with the departure of the Romans from Britain, the local *curiales* (aristocracy) took over control of Roman

Lincoln – one of four provincial capitals in Late Roman Britain – and the territory that it controlled (Eagles, 1989; Leahy, 1993; Yorke, 1993; Green, forthcoming). The resulting political unit probably encompassed modern Lindsey (which inherited its name, **Lindēs*, ‘the people of Lincoln’) and at least some territory to the south of Lincoln (Eagles, 1989: 202), with its centre remaining at Lincoln, where there would seem to have been a British church and probably bishop through the fifth century and into the sixth century (Jones, 1994; Green, forthcoming). How long this British **Lindēs* survived is unclear. Lincoln is clearly in Anglian hands by the early seventh century and Cessford has suggested that the *lwynysawr* who appear in *Y Gododdin* were ‘Lindseymen’ who fought at Catraeth for Mynyddawg in c.570 AD, after their own kingdom had finally been taken over by the Anglian invaders (Cessford, 1997: 220-1). How this take-over was actually achieved is unclear, but it may be worth noting that the Old English king-list for Lindsey includes a British name, *Cædbæd*, for a man who would have ruled in the fifth or sixth century (Dumville, 1977b: 90; Stafford, 1985: 87; Foot, 1993: 133 – this is now generally considered a wholly Brittonic name and not one of mixed origins, as has sometimes been assumed).

The distribution of Anglian archaeology in Lincolnshire supports this notion of a British ‘kingdom’ based around Lincoln, with the large cremation cemeteries forming a ring around the city, the closest being Lovedon Hill (17 miles to the south) and Cleatham (19 miles to the north). As Leahy (1993: 36) observes, this is unusual in comparison to many Roman cities and towns of the region, such as York, Caistor-by-Norwich, Leicester, and Ancaster. The most plausible explanation for this distribution is that the post-Roman Britons retained control of Lincoln and its *civitas* territory throughout the fifth century and were able to control and manage the Anglian settlers within their territory (see further Leahy, 1993; Sawyer, 1998; Green, forthcoming).

This, then, would seem to be a very convincing context for a historical Arthur. Here, in the heart of the region that saw mass Anglo-Saxon immigration (see Scull, 1995 on how the East Anglian, and by extension Lincolnshire, evidence must be interpreted in this light), we have a British-ruled territory. This, unlike other similar territories, seems to have been able to successfully resist pressure from the invaders and prevent them from encroaching on their chief settlement, Lincoln, during the fifth century and probably at least partway into the sixth century. In further support of this it should be noted that the name Lincoln, OE **Lindcolum*, is derived with little change from the Late British form, **Lindgolun*, something that is not true for most other Roman cities in Britain (Cameron, 1985: 1-3).

Some Conclusions

This study was prompted by the unwillingness of most historical Arthur theorists to even consider the possibility that he might have fought in the region around Lincolnshire. A detailed examination of the earliest and best source of information on any historical Arthur – the *Historia Brittonum* – suggests that this idea is not as implausible as it might at first seem.

Working with the assumption that the *Historia*, whilst it may have borrowed battles from other leaders and mythology, has at its *core* an accurate record of a single leader named Arthur who fought the Anglo-Saxons c.500 AD, a reasonably strong case can be constructed from the *Historia* alone for considering the Lincolnshire (and perhaps the East Riding of Yorkshire) region as the main sphere of Arthur’s activities. Widening our consideration of the evidence to look at the ‘legendary’ material results in a strengthening of this conclusion – academic opinion has often indicated that the

legendary material points to the very south-east of the 'Old North' for the origins of the Arthurian legend, that is the East Riding of Yorkshire. Taken together, this all suggests that we should see the area either side of the Humber as the region of operations for any historical Arthur.

Finally, any theory that is to be in any way plausible must have an appropriate historical context for Arthur. Arthur's fame comes from fighting the Anglo-Saxons *c.*500 AD and, given that it is now generally agreed that he is unlikely to have rode all around Britain fighting, we therefore need, at the very least, to place him where Anglo-Saxon immigrants were at that time. This is where theories that place him in Scotland, North Wales and Cornwall fall down. The region around the Humber is, in contrast, one of the primary areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement, especially in Lincolnshire. This context is even more appropriate, however, when we realise that a variety of evidence suggests that – despite heavy immigration – the rulers of the old *civitas* territory of Lincoln appear to have been able to control and resist the invaders, at least until the early-sixth century, and in noteworthy contrast to most other British elites in eastern Britain.

Why, if there is so much evidence, has no-one seriously made this case before? One is tempted to suggest that the less-than-ideal methodology that often besmirches historical Arthur studies is to blame: no-one expected any historical Arthur to be found in Lincolnshire, so he wasn't. Further, the contextual evidence discussed above emerges from very recent studies and few Arthurian theorists appear aware of recent trends and discoveries in the academic study of early-medieval eastern England (many studies still rely upon the now-outdated study of Alcock, 1971).

All told, this study has aimed to provide a more methodologically acceptable approach to the question of Arthur's identity. It has tried to avoid the logical leaps-of-faith that many studies employ. It has also tried to use *all* the available evidence, historical, legendary and archaeological – many theories tend to rely on just one or two of these. Thus we end up with theories that fit the written evidence but fail to find a plausible context for their Arthurs (such as notions that Arthur is to be found in southern Scotland), or theories that have a very good context (such as those based in southern England) but fail to explain the apparent 'northern' bias, observed by many Celticists, in the legendary materials. By placing Arthur around the Humber we avoid these pitfalls: he is far enough south and east to have a plausible historical context but far enough north to explain why he might be famous in the legends of *Y Gogledd*, the 'Old North', and finally – and most importantly – placing him here fits in with the evidence of the only source modern historians are willing to even partially trust (the *Historia Brittonum*) without doing damage to it.

Indeed, I find that I am not alone in this conclusion. John Koch has also recently considered the *Linnuis* battle to be highly significant, as the only securely identifiable battle-site which is actually in the 'right' area for its victor to have been battling the Anglo-Saxons *c.*500AD. He rightly concedes that the *Historia's* battle-list is very unreliable, but believes that its claim that Arthur existed does derive ultimately from Welsh oral tradition. His suggestion, with regards to the appropriateness of the location of *Linnuis* (Lindsey), is that this 'certainly raises the possibility that the same oral tradition also correctly remembered that Arthur fought and won there' (Koch, 2006: 120), a possibility that the present investigation has tried to examine fully and reinforce.

Some Caveats

One final feature of typical theories of a historical Arthur is unwillingness on the part of the authors to recognise the assumptions they have made and potential problems with their theories. As was noted earlier, *all* of the above is based around the assumption that there is a single, historical British war-leader called Arthur buried somewhere within the text of the *Historia Brittonum*. This is an assumption with a very respectable pedigree, but it is also highly debatable. Increasingly historians have attacked what David Dumville has termed the 'no smoke without fire' school of thought with regards to Arthur (Dumville, 1977a: 187). We need to recognise that the first reference to Arthur as a figure of history occurs more than 300 years after he is supposed to have lived, in a text that is often rightly treated with extreme caution for the fifth and sixth centuries. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that the *Historia Brittonum's* concept of Arthur as a war-leader, and the battles it ascribes to him, may well not be able to carry the weight of the assumptions and theories that have been attached to it (and them). Rather, most recent research rejects the notion that the *Historia* has any real value beyond telling us that, by the ninth century, some people believed that a historical war-leader called Arthur existed, with the battles listed in the *Historia* being too unreliable to allow any sensible reconstructions of the career of this Arthur, even if he did genuinely exist (see Dumville, 1986 and 1994; Charles-Edwards, 1991; Green, 1998; Higham, 2002; Green, 2007a).

Oliver Padel, in one important survey, argues persuasively that if we look at the whole body of early Arthurian material, the evidence points to Arthur being originally a figure of pan-Brittonic folklore and mythology, associated with the Otherworld, supernatural enemies and superhuman deeds, not history (Padel, 1994; see also, for example, Bromwich and Evans, 1992: xxviii-xxix and Green, 2007b). Rather than being a historical figure who gets absorbed into folklore and legend, he is more plausibly seen as a folkloric figure who is occasionally portrayed as historical, in the same manner as Hengest and the Gaelic Fionn mac Cumhaill, a position with which Rachel Bromwich has recently expressed considerable sympathy (Yorke, 1993; Ó hÓgáin, 1988; Bromwich, 2006: 282-3; see also Higham, 2002 and Green, 1998 and 2007a, for a similar concept of Arthur and his historicity as a hero of the late-fifth or early-sixth century).

Indeed, not only does the above argument critically undermine the notion of an originally historical Arthur, it also attacks the idea of a northern bias in the legendary sources: Arthur emerges from the entirety of the early material as a folkloric figure who was known throughout the Britain, with no real identifiable place of origins. Certainly issues with the supposed northern bias of the legendary material have been raised before, if never so powerfully, though Bromwich and others have tried to suggest solutions that preserve their case. With regards to these solutions it must be said that, as long as we see Arthur as a figure of history, the 'Northern Arthur' theory remains the most convincing interpretation, given the fact that Arthur can no longer be plausibly seen as a national figure; it is only when Arthur is freed from his historical bonds that his pan-Brittonic nature becomes plausible and the evidence for this can be accepted rather than explained away (Bromwich, 1975-6: 177ff. See Green, 2004, for some commentary on all this).

If we accept these new perspectives on the early Arthurian sources, it does not mean that the search for a historical Arthur is in vain. The *Historia's* Arthur may be a secondary creation but its vision and concept of a historical Arthur may not be entirely false: *someone* won the Battle of Badon (it is mentioned in the near-contemporary *De Excidio Britanniae* of Gildas) and thus, to some degree, there *was* a historical 'Arthur', even though he may have borne a different name and had his deeds reattributed to Arthur by the ninth century. Who might this 'Arthur' be? In this context it is worth noting that in Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae* Ambrosius Aurelianus is given prominence as the initiator

of the British counterattack which, after the fighting of several battles, culminates in the battle of Badon, just as Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum* initiates the British counterattack which, after the fighting of several battles, culminates in the battle of Badon. On the basis of this we could 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 his historicization were based on his deeds. Indeed, Padel and Wood have argued that a re-examination of the BL Cotton Vitellius A.vi manuscript of Gildas has the Battle of Mount Badon now reading ‘naturally as the victory that crowned the career of Ambrosius Aurelianus’, which places this contention on an even sounder footing (Padel, 1994: 16-18, at p.17; Wood, 1999: 34-8; see also Green, 1998 and the full discussion in Green, 2007a, chapter 6).

This is not to say, however, that we can therefore assign all the battles recorded in the *Historia* to Ambrosius Aurelianus. As has already been noted, the reliability of the list of battles has been called seriously into question. Most significantly, the battles ascribed to Arthur and used to historicize him seem to be drawn from many different sources. Badon, we have seen, potentially belonged originally to Ambrosius Aurelianus. The ‘battle on the bank of the river called *Tribruin*’ and *Cat Coit Celidon* could be actual Arthurian mythic battles, drawn into history at the same time as Arthur’s name became attached to Badon, as may be at least one other battle (Green, 1998; Green, 2007a). *Breguoin*’s association with Urien of Rheged has been discussed above, and Jackson thought another (*urbs Legionis*) was a borrowed seventh-century battle (Jackson, 1945-6). The Arthur of chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* would thus appear to be a composite figure, to some degree, when viewed in light of recent research (and as Sister Mary Hogan long ago thought – Hogan, 1933: 43-46).

Where then does this leave the case for a Lincolnshire Arthur? As I see it, there are three possible conclusions. The first involves accepting the above assumption – that a historical war-leader called Arthur does underlie the *Historia* – on the basis of ‘no smoke without fire’. There are good arguments for not doing this but, as was observed a little earlier, it is an assumption with a very respectable pedigree (for example, Bachrach, 1990; Koch, 1997: 148). If we do decide to do this then I think that the Lincolnshire and East Riding Arthur is the most elegant and historically plausible solution to the question of this leader’s identity, doing no damage to either the primary historical evidence or the predominant academic opinion on the origins of the legendary material, whilst being in harmony with the archaeological evidence for potential zones of Anglo-British conflict around 500 AD (a position which would seem to be supported by Koch, 2006: 120).

The second and third alternatives accept the validity of recent work on the existence of Arthur and the notion that the historical Arthur was a secondary development of a character from British folklore and myth. The second alternative asks, if there is a historical figure – who fought at Badon – at the heart of the *Historia*, called perhaps Ambrosius Aurelianus rather than Arthur, then could the Lincolnshire ‘core’ that has been suggested here in the *Historia*’s account represent *his* deeds? Certainly, if Baumber is Badon, this would seem a distinct possibility. In this context it is worth noting the following. First, unlike many of the other battles, both *Linnuis* and *Glein* have never been suggested as battles that are borrowed from myth or other historical figures – their very obscurity may thus point to them belonging to any original historical core that might be present in the *Historia Brittonum*. Second, not only would the historical context established above fit such a figure very well, there is a highly respectable school of academic thought that holds that Gildas was, in his account of the British counter-attack in the late-fifth century led by Ambrosius Aurelianus, writing about the region of the East Riding of York (Thompson, 1979: 215-9; Sims-Williams, 1983: 7; Dumville, 1984:

62-6). As such, this hypothesis cannot be easily dismissed without discussion, and I have recently offered a very tentative argument in support of it in *Concepts of Arthur* (Green, 2007a, chapter 6).

Finally, there is a minimalist interpretation. Badon could easily have been somewhere other than Baumber. If we reject the idea that a genuinely historical Arthur lay at the core of the *Historia*, then the secure identification of *Linnuis* as Lindsey can no longer privilege the idea that the other battles mentioned must be close by, as argued above. Fundamentally, the historicized Arthur of chapter 56 of the *Historia* appears to be a composite figure, made up of a framework based on the deeds of Ambrosius Aurelianus to which have been gathered various historical and mythical battles. *Linnuis*/Lindsey could be just one of these borrowings.

This does not, however, mean that all is in vain. There is no reason to think that *Linnuis* was a mythical battle and as such its presence in the battle-list implies that it is a borrowing of a historical conflict (or conflicts). This in turn suggests that, in the ninth century, memories of a British warrior who fought the Anglians in Lindsey survived and circulated in the British west and were eventually re-used and re-attributed to Arthur by the author of the *Historia* (or his hypothetical source). This may well be the most convincing possibility – it is also one that is of great interest to all those who are interested in the post-Roman history of Lincolnshire and how the native Britons interacted with the immigrants there.

Bibliography

Alcock, L. 1971, *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology AD 367-634* (Harmondsworth)

Alcock, L. 1972, 'By South Cadbury, is that Camelot...' *Excavations at Cadbury Castle 1966-70* (London)

Bachrach, B.S. 1990, 'The Questions of King Arthur's Existence and of Romano-British Naval Operations' in *Haskins Society Journal* 2, pp.13-28

Bartrum: C. 1965, 'Arthuriana in the Genealogical MSS' in *The National Library of Wales Journal* 14, pp.243-5

Bromwich, R. 1963, 'Scotland and the Earliest Arthurian Tradition' in *Bulletin Bibliographique de la Société Internationale Arthurienne* 15, pp.85-95

Bromwich, R. 1975-6, 'Concepts of Arthur' in *Studia Celtica* 10/11, pp.163-81

Bromwich, R. 1978, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff: second edition)

Bromwich, R. 2006, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff: third edition)

Bromwich, R. and Evans, D.S. 1992, *Culhwch and Olwen. An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale* (Cardiff)

Burkitt, T. and A. 1990, 'The frontier zone and the siege of Mount Badon: a review of the evidence for their location' *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* 134, pp.81-93

- Cameron, K. 1985, *The Place-Names of Lincolnshire 1* (English Place-Name Society 58, Cambridge)
- Cameron, K. 1991, *The Place-Names of Lincolnshire 2* (English Place-Name Society 64/5, Cambridge)
- Cessford, C. 1997, 'Northern England and the Gododdin Poem' *Northern History* 33, pp.218-222
- Charles-Edwards, T.M. 1991, 'The Arthur of History' in R. Bromwich et al (edd.) *The Arthur of the Welsh. The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 1991), pp.15-32
- Collingwood, W.G. 1929, 'Arthur's battles' in *Antiquity* 3, pp.292-98
- Cox, B. 1994, 'The pattern of Old English *burh* in early Lindsey' in *Anglo-Saxon England*, 23, pp.35-56
- Cox, B. 1997-8, 'Baumber in Lindsey' *English Place-Name Society Journal* 30, pp.27-32
- Dark, K.R. 2000, 'A Famous Arthur in the Sixth Century? Reconsidering the origins of the Arthurian Legend' in *Reading Medieval Studies*, 26, pp.77-95
- Dooley, A. 2005, 'Arthur of the Irish: a Viable Concept?' in C. Lloyd-Morgan (ed.) *Arthurian Literature XXI: Celtic Arthurian Material* (Cambridge), pp.9-28
- Dumville, D.N. 1974, 'Some Aspects of the Chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*' in *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 25
- Dumville, D.N. 1975-6, 'Nennius and the *Historia Brittonum*' in *Studia Celtica* 10/11, pp.78-95
- Dumville, D.N. 1977a, 'Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend' in *History* 62, pp.173-92
- Dumville, D.N. 1977b, 'Kingship, Genealogies and Renal Lists' in P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood (edd.) *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds), pp.72-104
- Dumville, D.N. 1984, 'The Chronology of *De Excidio Britanniae* Book I' in D.N. Dumville and I. Wright (edd.) *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge)
- Dumville, D.N. 1986, 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*' in *Arthurian Literature* 6, pp.1-26
- Dumville, D.N. 1989, 'The Origins of Northumbria' in S. Bassett (ed.) *Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester), pp.213-22
- Dumville, D.N. 1994, '*Historia Brittonum*: an Insular History from the Carolingian Age' in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (edd.) *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Wien/München) pp.406-34

- Eagles, B.N. 1989, 'Lindsey' in S. Bassett (ed.) *Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms (Leicester)*, pp.202-12
- Field, P.J.C. 1999, 'Gildas and the City of the Legions' in *The Heroic Age* 1
<<http://www.heroicage.org>>
- Field, N. and Hurst, H. 1983, 'Roman Horncastle' in *Lincolnshire History & Archaeology* 18, pp.47-88
- Foot, S. 1993, 'The Kingdom of Lindsey' in A. Vince (ed.) *Pre-Viking Lindsey (Lincoln)*, pp.128-40
- Gelling, M. 1988, 'Towards a chronology for English place-names' in D. Hooke (ed.) *Anglo-Saxon Settlements (Oxford)*
- Gelling, M. 1989, 'The Name Lindsey' in *Anglo-Saxon England*, 18, pp.31-2
- Green, T. 1998, *The Historicity and Historicization of Arthur*, archived at
<<http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm>>
- Green, T. 2004, *The Monstrous Regiment of Arthurs*, archived at
<<http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthurappendix.htm>>
- Green, T. 2007a, *Concepts of Arthur (Stroud)*
- Green, T. 2007b, 'A Note on *Aladur, Alator and Arthur*' in *Studia Celtica*, 41, pp.237-41
- Green, T. forthcoming, *A Re-evaluation of the Evidence of Anglian-British Interaction in the East Midlands (Oxford D.Phil Thesis)*
- Hanning, R.W. 1966, *The Vision of History in Early Britain (New York and London)*
- Hayes, P.P. and Lane, T.W. 1992, *The Fenland Project Number 5: Lincolnshire Survey, The South-West Fens East Anglian Archaeology, Report No. 55 (Sleaford)*
- Higham, N.J. 1992, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons (London)*
- Higham, N.J. 1994, *The English Conquest (Manchester)*
- Higham, N.J. 2002, *King Arthur, Myth-Making and History (London)*
- Hines, J. 1990, 'Philology, Archaeology and the *Adventus Saxonum vel Anglorum*' in A. Bammesberger and A. Wollman (edd.) *Britain 400-600: Language and History (Heidelberg)*, pp.17-36
- Hogan, M.G. 1933, *The Legend of Dathi: An Analogue to the Chronicle Story of Arthur (Washington D.C.)*
- Howlett, D.R. 1998, *Cambro-Latin Compositions, Their Competence and Craftsmanship (Dublin)*

- Isaac, G.R. 1999, 'Readings in the History and Transmission of the *Gododdin*' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 37 (Summer), pp.55-78
- Jackson, K. H. 1945-6, 'Once Again Arthur's Battles' in *Modern Philology* 43, pp.44-57
- Jackson, K.H. 1949, 'Arthur's Battle of Breguoin' in *Antiquity* 23, pp.48-9
- Jackson, K.H. 1953, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh)
- Jackson, K.H. 1958, 'The Site of Mount Badon' in *The Journal of Celtic Studies* 2, pp.152-5
- Jackson, K.H. 1959, 'The Arthur of History' in R. Loomis (ed.) *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford) pp.1-11
- Jackson, K.H. 1969, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh)
- Jarman, A.O.H. 1988, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin, Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem* (Llandysul)
- Jarman, A.O.H. 1989-90, 'The Arthurian Allusions in the Book of Aneirin' in *Studia Celtica* 24/5, pp.15-25
- Jones, M. 1994, 'St Paul in the Bail, Lincoln: Britain in Europe?' in K.S. Painter (Ed.) *Churches built in ancient times* (London), pp.325-47
- Koch, J.T. 1996, 'The Celtic Lands' in N.J. Lacy (ed.) *Medieval Arthurian Literature: A Guide to Recent Research* (New York) pp.239-322
- Koch, J.T. 1997, *The Gododdin of Aneirin. Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff)
- Koch, J.T. 2006, 'Arthur, the historical evidence' in J.T.Koch (ed.) *Celtic Culture, A Historical Encyclopedia* (Oxford), pp.117-22
- Koch, J.T. and Carey, J. 2003, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales* (Aberystwyth: 4th Edition)
- Lapidge, M. and Dumville, D.N. (edd.) 1984, *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge)
- Leahy, K. 1993, 'The Anglo-Saxon settlement of Lindsey' in A. Vince (ed.) *Pre-Viking Lindsey* (Lincoln), pp.29-44
- Ó hÓgáin, D. 1988, *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin)
- Padel, O.J. 1994, 'The Nature of Arthur' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (Summer) pp.1-31
- Padel, O.J. 1998, 'A New Study of the *Gododdin*' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 35 (Summer), pp.45-55
- Reavill, J.B. 2003, 'Lincolnshire in the Dark Ages' in *Lincolnshire Past & Present* 53 (Autumn), pp.3-4

- Sawyer, P.H. 1998, *Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire* (Lincoln)
- Scull, C. 1995, 'Approaches to the material culture and social dynamics of the migration period in eastern England' in J. Bintliff and H. Hamerow (edd.) *Europe Between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Oxford), pp.71-83
- Sims-Williams, P. 1983, 'Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons' in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 6, pp.1-30
- Skene, W.F. 1868, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Edinburgh) 2 vols.
- Snyder, C.A. 1998, *An Age of Tyrants. Britain and the Britons A.D. 400-600* (Pennsylvania/Stroud)
- Snyder, C. 2005, 'Arthur and Kingship in the *Historia Brittonum*' in N.J. Lacy (ed.) *Fortunes of King Arthur* (Woodbridge)
- Stafford, P. 1985, *The East Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester)
- Thompson, E.A. 1979, 'Gildas and the History of Britain' in *Britannia* 10, pp.203-26
- Wood, M. 1999, *In Search of England: Journeys into the English Past* (London)
- Yorke, B.A.E. 1993, 'Lindsey: The Lost Kingdom Found?' in A. Vince (ed.) *Pre-Viking Lindsey* (Lincoln), pp.141-50

Arthurian Notes & Queries is a series of brief studies of the Arthurian legend. It is published and written by Thomas Green and is archived on the website www.arthuriana.co.uk.

Copyright © 2007, Thomas Green. All Rights Reserved