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THE ARTHUR OF HISTORY

Thomas Charles-Edwards

MORE than one question may be asked by an historian about a person such as Arthur.¹ There is the familiar one, asked perhaps a little anxiously: Was Arthur a real person? With a little more knowledge of the ways in which the minds of historians work, a further question may be put: Is there anything valuable which an historian can say about Arthur himself as opposed to his later manifestations in poetry, story and hagiography? And, finally, with even more awareness of the canons of historical criticism, one may ask a question, not about the real, or supposedly real, Arthur, but about the accounts of him given in such texts as the *Historia Brittonum*: what was a given text's perception of Arthur?

The essential, but difficult, truth to learn is that the first question must be asked last and the last question first. Otherwise there will be no critically sifted evidence on the basis of which either of the other questions can be answered. Anyone is entitled to have his hunch, but before a hunch can attain even the modest dignity of an informed guess it needs to be shaped by an understanding of the evidence. Moreover, that understanding will be marred unless ulterior motives are kept firmly in check: the enquiry must first be into the texts themselves without prejudice to any further edifice of argument which may be built upon their foundations.

We may concentrate on the most important of these texts, the *Historia Brittonum*, though there are independent references to Arthur in what may be historical circumstances in two early Welsh poems. The reference in the *Gododdin* to the heroism of a certain Gwawrddur 'although he was not Arthur' (*ceni bei ef arthur*) is only in the B Version; its antiquity is therefore uncertain, for it is only when a passage occurs in both the A and the B Versions that there can be any confidence that it goes back before the ninth or tenth century.² The other poem, *Gereint filius Erbin*, although much relied on by the late John Morris, is likewise no earlier than the *Historia Brittonum* (the earliest recension of which is to be dated 829/830). They attest the development of Arthur's reputation in the centuries after the *Historia Brittonum*, but they do not provide an adequate basis for arguments about the historical Arthur.³ I shall, therefore, concentrate upon the *Historia*

Brittonum, not because everything it contains is historical, but because it is an attempt to make sense of the past by the means then available. I shall, however, leave to one side the section known as the *mirabilia*, although c. 73 refers to a son of Arthur and also to his hound Cabal (Cafall) and the hunting of Twrch Trwyth. The latter is best treated together with *Culhwch ac Olwen* (see ch.3), while the former seems to be an echo of a story telling how a hero killed his son, such as the Irish *Aided Óenfir Aife*. My principal target will be c. 56 of the *Historia Brittonum*, containing the well-known list of Arthur's battles; but because that chapter can only be understood in the context of the *Historia* as a whole, I shall begin with a consideration of the structure and character of the work.

Our understanding of this 'History of the Britons', however, is in process of being put on a much surer foundation by the series of critical editions of its successive versions now being published by Dr D.N. Dumville.⁴ Fortunately, he has also published a number of preliminary studies, including a vigorously polemical essay on 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*'.⁵ Nothing written at this stage of his great enterprise can pretend to any permanent value, but at least we can review progress to date.

Dr Dumville's main thesis may be summarized as an attack on the 'Heap' interpretation of the *Historia Brittonum*, an attack which is based upon both textual and historiographical premisses. The source from which the Heap theory has been derived is the 'Nennian Preface' which speaks in the first person: 'I, Nennius, a disciple of the holy Elbodugus have taken the trouble to write down some excerpts which the idleness of the people of Britain had caused to be thrown aside . . . I, however, have made a heap of all that I have found, both of the annals of the Romans and of the chronicles of the holy Fathers, and from the writings of the Irish and of the English and from the information handed down by the old men of our people.'⁶ The curious mixture of boast and modesty found in this Nennian Preface has been seized upon, both by those who would portray the writer as an ignorant and incompetent compiler and also by those who see in his words a foreshadowing of modern historical attitudes to evidence.⁷ Both these interpretations are based upon sandy foundations, for, as Dr Dumville has argued, the Preface was no part of the original text of 829/30 but was added later in a subsequent recension.⁸ It is, therefore, the idea of the authorship of the *Historia Brittonum* and of the nature of its contents put forward by a subsequent editor; and it remains to be demonstrated that this editor was any better informed than are modern scholars on the sources and working methods of the original author of the *Historia Brittonum*. It may be that the Preface has commanded respect because it is plainly correct in supposing that the original author used both Irish and English sources;⁹ for example, one of the sources

it names, a text entitled *Annales Romanorum*, was available to the compilers of the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* (alongside another, possibly related text, the *Annales Hebraeorum*) in the early eighth century.¹⁰ Yet, because the Preface is not evidently incorrect in its account of the sources available to our British historian, it does not follow that it is correct in what it says about the way in which those sources were used. The Preface does not, therefore, show that the *Historia Brittonum* was a mere collection of excerpts, a heap of what the author had found.

The argument against the Heap interpretation is also historiographical. It is claimed that the *Historia Brittonum* falls into a genre of historical writing well exemplified in early medieval Ireland, the synthetic history.¹¹ This form of historical writing is an expression of a sense of national unity projected back into a legendary past. A clear example is the account of the origins of the Irish presented in chapter 13 of the *Historia Brittonum*.¹² This had probably started as an origin legend of the Féni, one of 'the three free peoples' of Ireland. The Féni were divided between a northern branch (to which the Uí Néill and the Connachta belonged) and a southern branch, the ruling people of Munster. Their sense of unity was expressed genealogically, by making them all descend from a single ancestor, Míl Espáine; their divergence was expressed in the same way, by giving Míl two sons, one for the northern, one for the southern branch. The Féni came, by the early eighth century, to claim the status of pre-eminent ruling people in Ireland; but other Irish peoples were to attach themselves to this dominant stock, and, in order to accommodate their claims, the number of Míl's sons had to be expanded from two to three (as in the *Historia Brittonum*) and later six or even eight.¹³ The change from an origin legend of a particular Irish people to a history of the origin of the Irish people as a whole entailed the inclusion of the traditions of several peoples, not only the Féni but also the Ulaid, the Laigin and even the Érainn. Furthermore, a sense of the unity of the Irish people required, as a corollary, a sense of the difference between them and neighbouring peoples, Britons, English and Franks. An historical perception of Irish nationality also necessitated a linking of the Irish past with the better-known past of the Romans and of the Jews; the Irish were to have a place, alongside Franks, Britons and English, in the scheme of Christian history and chronology. The full programme of synthetic history included, therefore, not merely the assimilation of different native traditions, but the application of Christian learning. Only some of the raw material would now be origin legends and genealogies; there would also be learned speculation on the descent of the peoples of Europe from Noah and synchronisms between Irish rulers and those of the Romans and the Jews.

Much of this is true, however, not just of the Irish synthetic historians but of Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon. What defines synthetic history as a

genre is that its material lies in the pre-Christian past. In the historical perception of Irish scholars from the seventh century onwards there was a convenient, though sometimes only approximate, synchronism between the founders of the currently powerful dynasties and the conversion of the Irish by Patrick and others.¹⁴ The holy man could thus prophesy, and even determine, the rise and fall of dynasties; consequently hagiography depicted the political map of early Christian Ireland. The pre-Christian past, however, was even more malleable than the history of the fourth and fifth centuries, and the synthetic historians' accounts of that more distant past — beyond Patrick and his relationships with the founders of dynasties — were designed to explain and to justify the most general characteristics of the contemporary Irish polity, such as the relationship between the Leinstermen and the Uí Néill. The ostensible subject-matter of the synthetic historian is thus pre-Christian, although statements about the pre-Christian past were intended to make points about the Christian present. Moreover, some of the same preconceptions and techniques were applied to the early Christian period as well. There was no tidy boundary between the period covered by the synthetic historian and that covered by the post-Patrician annals and hagiography.

There is no doubt that the *Historia Brittonum* contains elements comparable to Irish synthetic history, but whether it is best characterized simply as British synthetic history is another matter. This is no mere matter of definition, for Dr Dumville draws a further consequence from his ascription of the *Historia Brittonum* to the genre: no historian, he says, would now place any trust in the literal truth of the narratives offered by such texts; they are interesting for the mentalities and for the political and other interests of the authors, not for the periods about which they purport to write.¹⁵ The *Historia Brittonum* is thus a source for the first half of the ninth century, not for the fifth and sixth centuries. What should concern the historian is what the author of the *Historia Brittonum* said about Germanus, Gwrtheyrn (Vortigern) and Arthur, and why he said it, not whether his statements about such personages have any value as evidence for their careers.

The positive element in this argument is undoubtedly correct: the *Historia Brittonum* is, first and foremost, evidence for the *Historia Brittonum*, for the ideas, sources, culture and intentions of its author. The negative element, however, is much less certain. There are two positions which may be taken: on the one hand one may argue along the sceptical lines taken by Dr Dumville; on the other, one may take the view that it is impossible to prescribe what conclusions may or may not, in the future, be drawn from the text. In particular, it may reasonably be asked how, until the enquiry into the nature and background of the *Historia Brittonum* itself has been brought to a much more advanced stage, one can have such certainty about the value

of its evidence for earlier periods. If the crucial rule of method is accepted — first study your source for itself and only then decide what may be the value of its evidence — neither a sceptical nor a non-sceptical position should be adopted at this stage. What has enabled Dr Dumville to take a sceptical position with such confidence is not any rule of historical method, but the proposition that the *Historia Brittonum* is a work of synthetic history.¹⁶

His most recent statement of historical method is that one may only accept as evidence testimony that is either contemporary or can be shown to be derived from contemporary sources 'by an identifiable and acceptable line of transmission'.¹⁷ This rule seems to me to be too limited. For example, contemporary evidence, imperfectly intelligible on its own, may be explained by information given in a later text. In such a case, there may be good reason to accept the evidence of the later text, even though we are unable to say how it derived its information from a contemporary source. Similarly, there are classic instances in the Carolingian period illustrating an obvious point: a contemporary source may be so constrained by political or other pressures that it cannot tell the truth, whereas a later text, being under less pressure, may be a more reliable source, even though we have no precise idea of the source from which it derived its information.¹⁸

I have already admitted that the *Historia Brittonum* contains synthetic history, for it is the first text to contain an account of the origins of the Irish, an account later to be worked up into the classical example of synthetic history, the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, 'The Book of the Conquest of Ireland'.¹⁹ Similarly, the origin of the British people is the first great theme of the *Historia Brittonum* after the opening chronological section on the Six Ages of the World. But if an interest in legends about the origins of peoples is to be enough to brand an entire text as synthetic history and thus as worthless evidence for the period of which it treats, Paul the Deacon and Bede will stand in the dock along with the author of the *Historia Brittonum*. No one will wish to treat Paul the Deacon's account of the dealings of the Lombards with Woden and Freia as sober truth, but the presence of such material in the *Historia Langobardorum* does not make the totality into synthetic history.²⁰ In any case, the central theme of the *Historia Brittonum* is the relationship between the Gallo-Roman saint Germanus, the British king Gwrtheyrn and the English *dux* Hengest. The Germanus of the *Historia Brittonum* is the pivot between a Roman and a British past, betrayed by a pair of rulers, Maximianus (Maximus) and Gwrtheyrn, and two futures, one Christian and British, the other English, initially pagan but ultimately also Christian. Even though the *Historia Brittonum* declares (c. 22) that the Britons had earlier been converted by a mission sent both by emperors and by the Pope, Gwrtheyrn himself is presented as if he were a pagan:

Germanus fails to convert him to 'his [i.e. Germanus's] Lord' and his guidance comes from the *magus*, the druid, not from the Christian bishop.²¹ The conflict between holy man and pagan king is interwoven with the story of the settlement of the English, led by Hengest, a settlement which took place 'by divine will' (c. 45). The treatment is reminiscent of the conflict between Patrick and Lóegaire (which, interestingly, the *Historia Brittonum* omits from its account of Patrick in cc. 50-5) and of that between Elijah and Ahab. Perhaps the main concern of the author of the *Historia Brittonum* is to encourage the Britons to come to terms with defeat and loss of territory. Not for him the fierce resentment of the tenth-century poem *Armes Prydein* with its hope that the English might yet be driven back into the German Ocean out of which they had come. He understands such feelings: Gwrthefyr compelled Hengest's men to flee to their boats 'like women' (c. 44). Yet what concerns him more is the role of the Britons in the providential history not just of their own island but also of Ireland. A Briton, Patrick, would be sent by the Pope, 'by the advice and persuasion of the holy bishop Germanus' (c. 51) to convert the Irish; a Briton, Rhun ab Urien, would baptize the Northumbrians for forty days (c. 63). The victories of a Gwrthefyr, or an Arthur, might be glorious, but they had no future; the triumphs of a Patrick and of a Rhun ab Urien would bring whole peoples to salvation.

It may be worth distinguishing two genres of historical writing, both practised by the Irish, sometimes in combination, and both present in the *Historia Brittonum*, synthetic history and synchronistic history. Synthetic history, as presented in the classic account by MacNeill, has been described already; synchronistic history is concerned to establish a chronological relationship between the histories of different peoples; the model here was Eusebius's Chronicle with its desire to establish the superior antiquity of Judaeo-Christian tradition compared with those of Greece and Rome. Synthetic history may require synchronisms, but synchronistic history is not necessarily a quasi-historical presentation of a legendary past; it is an essential part of any history which draws upon records and traditions from distinct peoples. If the *Historia Brittonum* contained some synthetic history, synchronisms were part of its very structure, for it needed to weave the histories of the Romans, the Irish and the English into its account of the Britons.

In the early Middle Ages these forms of historical writing occur more often as elements in a larger whole than as self-contained entities. The larger wholes are provided by two genres of history which interact: the history of a people and ecclesiastical history, *historia gentis* and *historia ecclesiastica*. Jordanes's (and Cassiodorus's) *Historia Gothorum*, the *Liber Historiae Francorum* and Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum* were histories of a people, whereas Gregory of

Tours wrote ecclesiastical history.²² Gregory of Tours begins with the Creation, Paul the Deacon with the Scandinavian origins of the Lombards. An *origo gentis* is thus a normal starting-point for the history of a people, whether it be in ancient Germania or in the city of Troy.

When ecclesiastical history was adapted for a readership ruled by barbarian kings, it became natural to begin on a broad scale, with the history of salvation, but to narrow the scope as the history developed. Gregory of Tours might begin with the Creation and the Fall but he then proceeded via St Martin to Clovis and Frankish Gaul. Bede began with the Roman conquest of Britain (the invasions of Julius Caesar and of Claudius straddled in time the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection). However, he soon came to concentrate on the English people and so wrote an *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. In Bede, therefore, there was a conscious interweaving of the two genres, the history of a people and ecclesiastical history. The same is true of the *Historia Brittonum*. It begins with the Six Ages of the World, a theme appropriate to ecclesiastical history, but then turns to the origin of the British people, an *origo gentis* closely related to the *origo* of the Franks given in Fredegar's Chronicle and in the *Liber Historiae Francorum*.²³ In the relationship between Gwrtheyrn, Germanus and Hengest the *Historia Brittonum* examines the fates of two peoples, the Britons and the English, and the progress of Christianity in Britain. We may define the genre of the *Historia Brittonum*, therefore, as a fusion of *historia gentis* and *historia ecclesiastica*. If such history is unhistorical, so also are all the major histories of the early Middle Ages.

Of the two elements in Dr Dumville's attack on the Heap interpretation of the *Historia Brittonum*, the one based on the history of the text is more securely founded than the historiographical argument. Yet, even with the latter, while one may not give full assent to the labelling of the *Historia Brittonum* as synthetic history, there may yet be good reason to think that it has a unity of structure and outlook, and that it is therefore far more than a mere heap. In spite of its relatively small scale, the *Historia Brittonum* is in the grand tradition of early medieval history.

The function of the account of Arthur's battles in c. 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* must now be judged in the light of our opinion of the structure and outlook of the whole work. If we see the relationship between Germanus, Gwrtheyrn and Hengest as the central theme, between the origins of the British people and the history of Roman Britain, on the one hand, and the English genealogies and the Northern History on the other, the role of the Arthurian chapter becomes clear. The author requires a link between two principal sections; since an essential element in much of his work is the relationship between holy man and the fate of nations, he finds a double link, first the story of Patrick and then the wars of Arthur. Since he is

fundamentally an ecclesiastical historian, he gives much more space to Patrick than to Arthur. Patrick gives the reader a sense of continuity from the central figure of Germanus; Arthur echoes the achievements of Gwrtheyyr and so offers a further contrast with Gwrtheyyr; his victories also call forth another phase of migration from Germany leading to the establishment of Germanic kingdoms in Britain. The structure may thus be set out as follows:

Principal Themes	Linking Passages
Germanus, Gwrtheyrn and Hengest, cc. 31-49	Patrick (a link from Germanus), cc. 50-5 Arthur (a link from Hengest and Gwrtheyrn to Ida and the Northern History), c. 56
The English royal genealogies and the Northern History, cc. 57-65	

The role of the Arthurian chapter is thus secondary but nevertheless important to the organization of the History as a whole.

Certain points of interpretation follow from this view of the form of the work. The chronological frame of the Arthurian chapter is provided by the two end-points, the death of Hengest and the establishment by Ida of an English kingdom in Bernicia; the death of Hengest looks back to the central theme of the *Historia*, while the accession of Ida brings us into the second half of the sixth century, to the wars of the North British kings against the English of Bernicia and eventually to the conversion of Northumbria by a Briton, Rhun ab Urien.

In geographical terms, however, there is a tension between the Kentish perspective implicit in the beginning of the Arthurian chapter and the wide spatial sweep of Arthur's battles.²⁴ The *Historia Brittonum* brings Octha down from the North to Kent and makes him the ancestor of its royal kindred. 'Then', so we are told, 'Arthur was fighting against them in those days with the kings of the Britons, but he himself was *dux bellorum*.' This introduces the list of twelve battles culminating in the battle 'in monte Badonis'; and, finally, the English are said to have turned in desperation to Germany from where they drew, not only fighting men, but kings 'that they might reign over them in Britain'. Mention of kings leads straight to Ida and Bernicia. Previously we have had the foundation of only one English kingdom, that of Kent. The implication, therefore, is that the kings of Kent alone derived their origin from a pre-Arthurian era; otherwise English kingship was imported from Germany as a reaction to Arthur's victories.

This conception is related to the movement from the theme of Germanus, Gwrtheyrn and Hengest to the material taken from the Anglian Collection of genealogies and regnal lists.²⁵ There the new English kingdoms are displayed in full. Again, however, there is no mere heap of borrowed material, for the author of the *Historia* knows how to link his various themes. In his source, the Anglian Collection, all the lines end with Woden Frealafing, 'Woden the son of Frealaf', except for the genealogy of the kings of Lindsey. This is taken back another four generations to Geat. In the *Historia* the lines are reversed so that they run from ancestor to descendant rather than the other way round; they thus begin, except for one, with Woden (not with his father Frealaf). The exception this time is Kent rather than Lindsey (which is omitted). In c. 58 the line begins, not with Woden, but with Hengest and descends to Ecgbert; in other words, the line is shorter than the others. The anomaly draws attention back to the genealogy of Hengest and Horsa in c. 31 where the anomaly works the other way, for the line here ascends back beyond Woden to Geat. The central position given to Lindsey in the Anglian Collection is now taken by the kings of Kent. Moreover the genealogy revolves around Hengest, descending from him in c. 58 and ascending from him in c. 31. Even in the section on the kings of the English, Hengest is given a pivotal position, and it is that position which provides structural unity.

The significance of all this is best understood by comparing the *Historia Brittonum* with Bede. Both were drawing on Kentish material for their account of the English settlement, which both see in terms of the supposed ancestors of the kings of Kent, Hengest, Oeric or Oisc and Octha or Ocga. In Bede it looks very much as though his Kentish source has combined two different accounts, one centred upon the heroic figure of Hengest, the other upon the eponymous ancestor of the kings of Kent, namely Oisc.²⁶ The same combination of Hengest and Oisc (*Æsc*) underlies the Kentish origin legend in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; but in Bede's account of Hengest there is the special feature, not found in the Chronicle, that Hengest came to England as the leader of a force made up of contingents from 'three of the more powerful peoples of Germany'. Hengest, in other words, was remembered as a *dux*, a warlord whose host was not confined within the limits of any one *gens*.²⁷

The same conception may lie behind the *Historia*'s statement that Hengest invited so many ships from the islands off Germany that they were left empty of inhabitants (c. 38); he is perceived as the organizer of an army of settlement rather than as a mere ancestral king of a single people. The Arthurian chapter begins, therefore, with a reference to Hengest's function as the assembler of the English migration to Britain, but it also stresses the Kentish dimension of Hengest by saying

that after his death Octha, his son, came from North Britain to Kent, 'and from him stem the kings of the Kentishmen'. We are then told that Arthur 'fought against them in those days with the kings of the Britons'. Although one might be forgiven for supposing that by 'them' the *Historia* meant the Kentishmen, the battles make it clear that this is not so: his enemies were the English as a whole.²⁸ Similarly Arthur fought 'together with the kings of the Britons, but he was their war-leader (*dux bellorum*)'. The role of Arthur as the leader of the Britons in a series of named battles is reminiscent of that assigned to Gwrthefyr, son of Gwrtheyrn, in cc. 43-4, where his leadership of the Britons introduces a list of battles with precise geographical specification. In that case the source appears to be ultimately Kentish and to be the same as that used, at one or more removes, by *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in its account of the foundation of the kingdom of Kent.²⁹ Yet, with Arthur, although the introductory sentences in c. 56 are highly Kentish, the geography of the list of battles, as we have seen, is not. The Kentish starting-point of the Arthurian chapter is therefore necessitated by the balance between Hengest, the English *dux*, and Arthur, the British *dux*, and the way the battles of Arthur echo the battles of Gwrthefyr.

The scope and character of the authority assigned to Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum* is also closely comparable with that which it gives to Penda in the campaign leading to the battle of the Winwaed (the *Historia*'s 'Field of Gai'). The *reges Brittonum* are said to have 'gone out with Penda on an expedition as far as the fortress which is called Iudeu' (c. 64). It is now clear that this kind of war-leadership, embracing the contingents of a number of kings, was an essential element in the position of the so-called Bretwalda, although it is ascribed to rulers who were not mentioned by Bede in his famous list of kings who enjoyed an *imperium* either over the Southern English or, *maiore potentia*, over the whole, or almost the whole, of Britain.³⁰

Our understanding of this position — one cannot go so far as to call it an office³¹ — is hampered by the difficulty in balancing its English and British dimensions. On the one hand, it appears initially as an authority over the Southern English, those south of the Humber; on the other, the term Bretwalda, found in the Parker Chronicle, means 'British ruler', while the form found in the other versions of the Chronicle, Brytenwalda (Breotenwalda), means 'Ruler of Britain'. Even if the Parker Chronicle's version of the term is not a mere scribal error, there seems to be no genuine difference of meaning between them. The attempt of Mr E. John, following Kemble and others, to interpret Brytenwalda as 'wide ruler' rests on a straightforward philological error;³² and the more general senses of the term found in poetry must therefore be secondary to its primary meaning, 'Ruler of Britain'. It is

unlikely that the Chronicle's use of such a term is an innovation of the ninth century, for Adomnán in the late seventh describes Oswald as *totius Britanniae imperator*, and the Ismere charter of Æthelbald (AD 736) describes him in the witness-list as *rex Britanniae*.³³ The latter's apparent equation of 'king of the provinces of the Southern English' (in the poem of the charter) with 'king of Britain' (in the witness-list) may constitute a claim, not just that Æthelbald was in some sense the ruler of Britain, but also that the pre-eminent king of the Southern English should also be the ruler of Britain. Such an aspiration might not be acceptable to the Welsh — in spite of the much later acknowledgement that the 'crown of London' had passed to the English — but it would also be directed against the Northumbrians. The annal in the Continuation of Bede, s.a. 750, according to which 'Cuthred, king of the West Saxons, rebelled against King Æthelbald and Oingus', strongly suggests that some form of agreement had by then been made according to which Æthelbald was recognized as overlord of Southern Britain while Oingus was overlord of Northern Britain, including a claim to suzerainty over Northumbria.³⁴

The uncertainty as to what kind of aspiration or claim such titles may have implied also hampers our interpretation of c. 56 of the *Historia Brittonum*. Its author plainly took much material from English as well as Irish sources. He appears to have favoured a reconciliation, based upon a common faith, between the Britons and the English: Oswald's death is portrayed in c. 65 as the killing of a saint by a pagan king, Penda, using treachery and also *diabolicam artem*; any participation of the Britons in the battle is passed over in silence. Gwrtheyrn, too, is depicted as a pagan, into whose heart 'Satan entered'. Arthur, however, in his eighth battle 'carried the image of the holy and perpetual Virgin Mary upon his shoulders and the pagans were turned to flight on that day', an act which is reminiscent of Bede's story that Oswald carried a Cross into battle against Cadwallon.³⁵ As Bede's story echoes the eastern cult of the Cross, so does the *Historia*'s account remind us of the use of an icon of the Blessed Virgin in the defence of Constantinople.³⁶ The similarity to Bede's account of Oswald as bearer of the Cross is still clearer in the *Annales Cambriae*, of the tenth century, where Arthur's use of an icon of the Virgin is transmuted into the bearing of the Cross on his shoulders 'for three days and three nights', and it is applied to the Battle of Mount Badon (s.a. 516). This version appears to be later than that of the *Historia Brittonum* (because of the elaboration whereby the one day has become three days and nights) and is unlikely to be wholly independent of it. There is, as we shall see, no reason to suspect any earlier date for the other Arthurian annal in *Annales Cambriae* (s.a. 537): 'Gueith Camlann in qua Arthur et Medraut corruerunt'.³⁷

The late Dr Kathleen Hughes, in her studies of the *Annales Cambriae* argued

convincingly that the framework for the annals up to 613 was a version of the Chronicle of Ireland compiled in the early tenth century.³⁸ It has subsequently been argued by Dr Dumville that the source was a member of the Clonmacnoise group of annals deriving from the Chronicle of Ireland and that it continued at least as far as 888.³⁹ Dr Hughes also maintained that after 613 the *Annales Cambriae* drew upon a North British source which continued up to the late eighth century.⁴⁰ The problem with the Arthurian annals can now be seen more clearly: they derive from a period in which there is no secure evidence of any British annalistic source. It is conceivable that they belong to the same North British text which is more clearly detectible after 613, a text which Dr Hughes maintains was also used by the *Historia Brittonum*. It may be objected, however, that the distance between the annal on the Battle of Mount Badon and the *Historia's* account of Arthur's battles is much greater than we should expect if both derived from the same North British source. A point of comparison is given by their accounts of the Battle of the Winwaed (the 'Field of Gai'), used by Hughes to argue, not only that the *Annales Cambriae* and the *Historia Brittonum* were using the same source, but that this source did not have an annalistic form.⁴¹ If one pursues this objection, it is difficult to see how any reason could be given to show that the compiler of the *Annales Cambriae* in the mid-tenth century had a written source for his Arthurian material. Moreover, even if he did, there is no reason to suppose that it was ancient.

The problems may be seen even more clearly if we look at a suggestion made by Thomas Jones. He pointed out the oddity of the annal for 516: 'Bellum Badonis in quo Arthur portavit crucem Domini nostri Iesu Christi tribus diebus et tribus noctibus in humeros suos et Brittones uictores fuerunt.'⁴² The bare style adopted by these annals would have led one to expect an entry consisting solely of the two words, 'Bellum Badonis'; and the rest may therefore be suspected of being later elaboration. This point may, however, be put in two forms. First, it may be an observation — as for Jones it was — about the style of the tenth-century A version of the *Annales Cambriae*; if so, the later elaboration might have occurred between the mid-tenth and the early twelfth century, the date of the MS. Or, secondly, it might be a point about the character of the source used by the *Annales Cambriae*. In that case the clear assumption would have been made that this source was annalistic. Only then would it be appropriate to expect the brevity associated with annals.

At this point further uncertainties come into view. Kathleen Hughes's view of the construction of the A version of the *Annales Cambriae* was that it was, so to speak, 'end-on': that is to say that the tenth-century compiler used the Chronicle of Ireland up to 613; he then switched to his North British source, following it until 777, after which he used St David's annals (at least from 796). There is some doubt

about the date of the changeover from the northern source to the St David's annals, but in any case it seems that, for Hughes, the tenth-century annalist did not use two sources for the one period. This analysis leads directly to her view that the few Welsh annals for the period before 613 do not derive from the northern text and are not sufficient to give us grounds for positing a distinct source. They may, therefore, derive from tenth-century editing.

A different line is taken by Dr Dumville. He abandons the 'end-on' analysis, arguing that the *Annales Cambriae* used the Chronicle of Ireland after 613, and the North British source after 777.⁴³ Moreover, in his view the latter was a set of annals, whereas Hughes was quite clear that it was not annalistic.⁴⁴ On this analysis of the construction of *Annales Cambriae*, whereby the sources overlap, it becomes much easier to suppose that the sixth-century annals referring to Britain came from the North British source. This was also used by the *Historia Brittonum* and therefore cannot be later than the early ninth century. To return to Thomas Jones's suggestion, we seem to be, if we are prepared to follow Dr Dumville, in a position to posit an entry for the Battle of Badon already in existence in the North British annals, an entry which might have been expanded in the way Jones suggested.

Yet, at this point there is no escaping the serious difficulty already mentioned. The only grounds for supposing that the sixth-century British annals did come from the northern source are that there is evidently some kind of relationship between the annal on the Battle of Badon and the reference in the *Historia Brittonum* to that other battle, 'bellum in castello Guinnion, in quo Arthur portavit imaginem sanctae Mariae perpetuae virginis super humeros suos, et pagani versi sunt in fugam in illo die, et caedes magna fuit super illos per virtutem Domini nostri Iesu Christi et per virtutem sanctae Mariae virginis genetricis eius'. Yet the correspondence occurs in what, on Jones's view, is the elaboration upon the original bare annal (which was simply 'an. Bellum Badonis'). What points to a common source (in Dumville's view a set of annals), is precisely what, on Jones's view, is least annalistic. Moreover, we still have to explain why it is that different battles are in question, why in one case it is an icon of the Virgin and in the other a cross, why in one case Arthur carries the icon in a battle occurring on a single day, whereas in the other he carries the cross for three days and three nights. If both texts derive their information immediately from the same source, major rewriting has taken place. An easier conclusion is that divergent literary elaboration has led to two different versions, one in the *Historia Brittonum* and the other in the *Annales Cambriae*; such elaboration may have been within an oral rather than a written tradition, but even if it was in written form, it is unlikely that it was annalistic. There is, then, no need to suppose that the two versions of the story were taken into our historical texts before the dates of their final

composition (829/30 and the 950s).

There is also the other Arthurian annal (*Annales Cambriae*, s.a. 537): 'Gueith Camlann in qua Arthur et Medraut corruerunt'. Here the form of the entry is entirely typical of annals. Unexceptionable form is, however, no guarantee of early date. There is nothing in the *Historia Brittonum* corresponding to this annal, and thus no reason to suppose that it came from the possible North British annals. On the evidence of the *Historia Brittonum*, especially c. 73 of the *mirabilia*, and the early poetry, interest in Arthur was amply sufficient by the tenth century for an annalist of that date to have composed such annals without any written source.⁴⁵

The general position with c. 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* does not seem to be much more promising if one's interest is directed solely towards its demonstrable factual content. One cannot help suspecting that the account of Arthur's battles has in part been moulded by the concerns of the seventh and eighth centuries, in England as well as in Wales. The *dux bellorum* can hardly be entirely separated from the military *ducatus* exercised by such English kings as Edwin over other kingdoms. The significance of c. 56 for the *Historia Brittonum* itself is secondary, for its principal concern is with divine providence rather than with human heroism in war. By contrast with Vortigern, into whose heart the Devil had entered, and also by contrast with Vortigern's Britons, a people lacking in military capacity ruled by a king without vigour (c. 37), Gwrthefyr and Arthur fought victoriously against the invaders. Yet, in the end, their victories served only to reveal the more clearly that it was God who had determined that the Saxons should settle in Britain under their own kings. However Christian and however heroic Arthur's victories may have been, they, like Gwrthefyr's, only called forth a further wave of migration; moreover they brought into Britain kings, as well as warriors, out of Germany. The royal dynasties of the English therefore ruled their British lands by divine will. What was not just victorious in the short term but triumphant in the end was the missionary work of Patrick and Rhun ab Urien. Whether or not the author of the *Historia Brittonum* knew Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, he had an answer to Bede's accusation (I. 22) that 'together with the other unspeakable crimes which their historian Gildas recounted in tearful prose, they were also adding this, that they never communicated the word of the Faith by preaching to the people of the Saxons or English who inhabited Britain with them'.

Although the use, in c. 56, of a Welsh battle-listing poem has been suspected,⁴⁶ perhaps rightly, no such source is likely for the list of Gwrthefyr's battles in c. 44.⁴⁷ And, if there was such a poem celebrating Arthur's battles, its date remains entirely uncertain. Such a theory about the source of c. 56 offers us no high road to the historical Arthur. Chapter 56 is very interesting for the student of the *Historia*

Brittonum; and it cannot be ruled out *a priori* that some useful information about the sixth century may, some day, be surmised on the basis of the text; but, at the moment, the prospects are poor. At this stage of the enquiry, one can only say that there may well have been an historical Arthur; that the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him, but that later conceptions of Arthur are likely to interest historians almost as much as they do students of medieval literature.

NOTES:

1. I am very grateful to the editors for their patience and to David Dumville and Morfydd Owen for reading drafts. I have greatly benefited from their suggestions. Previous studies of this question include the essay by K.H. Jackson, 'The Arthur of History', in *ALMA* 1-11; and the earlier part of T. Jones, 'The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur', *NMS*, 8 (1964), 3-21. Jones's article also embraces the earlier stages of Arthur's literary career; for a recent study which similarly includes both the historical and the literary Arthur, see R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', *SC*, 10/11 (1975-6), 163-81.

2. *CA*, line 1242; A.O.H. Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin, Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem* (Llandysul, 1988), line 972, and the note *ad loc.* R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', 176, sees Old Welsh orthography in this stanza and so considers it to date from the ninth century at the latest. This is unsafe: elements of Old Welsh orthography were still in use in the mid-thirteenth century, as in the Black Book of Chirk and Peniarth MS 28.

3. The poem on Geraint is ed. by B.F. Roberts in *Ast. H.*, 286-96. John Morris's discussion is in his *The Age of Arthur* (London, 1973), 104-6. Early Welsh Arthurian poetry is surveyed by Thomas Jones, 'The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur', 13-18, and by K.H. Jackson, 'Arthur in Early Welsh Verse', *ALMA* 12-19. On the date of the *Historia Brittonum* see D.N. Dumville, 'Some Aspects of the Chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*', *B*, 25 (1974), 439-45.

4. One volume has appeared: *Historia Brittonum*: iii. *The 'Vatican' Recension*, ed. D.N. Dumville (Cambridge, 1985). For the early Harleian Recension, the text most commonly used is still the edition of Mommsen in his *Chronica Minora Saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, iii (MGH AA xiii). The Harleian text is to be found in E. Faral, *LA* iii, 1-62, from which it was printed, with some additions and a translation, by J. Morris, *Nennius, British History, and the Welsh Annals* (London and Chichester, 1980). My references to chapters are to those used by Mommsen and Morris.

5. D.N. Dumville, 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Arthurian Literature*, 6 (1986), 1-26.

6. Ed. Th. Mommsen, *Chronica Minora*, iii, 143; ed. Morris, p. 50.

7. Favourable: J. Morris (ed. and transl.) *Nennius, British History, and the Welsh Annals*, 8; unfavourable: see the collection of dismissive quotations assembled by Dumville, 'The Historical Value', 5.

8. D.N. Dumville, 'Nennius' and the *Historia Brittonum*', *SC*, 10/11 (1975-6), 78-95.

9. Cf. c. 15, 'sic mihi peritissimi Scottorum nuntiaverunt' and, e.g., the use of the Anglian Collection of genealogies and regnal lists in cc. 57-65.

10. *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, XXXI. 6; XXXII. 17. b (cf. 16. b); LXIII. 2. b (ed. F.W.H. Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung*, 2nd edn., Leipzig, 1885). Neither can very well be a generic reference to annals of the Jews or Romans. Material attributed to Origen seems to have been part of the *Annales Hebraeorum* (cf. XXXI. 6 with XXXII. 17. b), and the nature of the text following the phrase *In annalibus Romanorum* suggests that it is a quotation.
11. Dumville, 'The Historical Value', 5-8.
12. Cf. T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 475-6.
13. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, 195-7.
14. For example, the sons of Niall of the Nine Hostages in Muirchú, I. 15-21, esp. 21 (2) and Tírechán, 8-10, 12 (ed. L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, x (Dublin, 1979), 84-98, 130-2).
15. Dumville, 'The Historical Value', 7-8, 11.
16. Dr Dumville remarks very reasonably of the *Historia Brittonum* ('Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend', *History*, N.S. 62 (1977), 177) 'that we must apply the same critical techniques to this text as we would to any other "historical" narrative', but the inverted commas around 'historical' are, to my mind, objectionable.
17. D.N. Dumville, 'Historical Archaeology and Northumbrian History', in *Coinage in Ninth-Century Northumbria: The Tenth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History*, ed. D.M. Metcalf (Brit. Archaeol. Reports, British Ser., 180; Oxford, 1987), p. 55.
18. For example, in the *Annales Regni Francorum* (ed. F. Kurze, *MGH SRG in usum Schol.*, Hanover, 1895), s.a. 778, the disaster at Roncesvaux is only in the later version.
19. See above, n.12.
20. Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, I. 8 (ed. G. Waitz, *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum Saec. VI-IX*, 52) himself describes the tale as *risui digna*.
21. *Historia Brittonum*, cc. 40, 47. If the author of the *Historia Brittonum* had considered Gwrtheyrn to be a Christian, he should have used the phrase *ad Dominum*, not *ad Dominum suum*.
22. In the preface to Book II Gregory invokes the example of Eusebius and Orosius. The commonly used title *Historia Francorum* is not original: only MS C1a describes it as *ecclesiastica historia Francorum*. On Cassiodorus and Jordanes see P. Heather, 'Cassiodorus and the Rise of the Amals', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 79 (1989), 103-28, who cites earlier discussions.
23. R.A. Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians and the Liber Historiae Francorum* (Oxford, 1987), ch.2.
24. K.H. Jackson, 'Once again Arthur's Battles', *Modern Philology*, 43 (1945-6), 57, points to Linnuis for Lindsey and Coit Celidon for Coed Celyddon in Scotland; he places Mons Badonis in southern Britain, but this is less certain (cf. K.H. Jackson, 'The Site of Mount Badon', *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 2 (1953-8), 152-5).
25. D.N. Dumville, 'The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 5 (1976), 23-50.
26. P. Sims-Williams, 'The Settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 12 (1983), 22.

27. Cf. W. Schlesinger, 'Über germanisches Königtum', in *Das Königtum*, Vorträge und Forschungen, iii (1956), 103-41, esp. 116-31; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford Medieval Texts, 1988), 23-4 and 215.
28. See K.H. Jackson, 'Once again Arthur's Battles', n.24 above. It is likely that the author of the *Historia Brittonum* would himself have known, at least very approximately, the location of Linnuis and of Coed Celyddon, and perhaps also that of the *urbs legionis*.
29. N.P. Brooks, 'The Creation and Early Structure of the Kingdom of Kent', in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. S. Bassett, Studies in the Early History of Britain (London, 1989), 58-64.
30. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II. 5; see the addendum on this chapter in J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History: A Historical Commentary*, 220-2.
31. P. Wormald, 'Bede, the Bretwaldas and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. P. Wormald with D. Bullough and R. Collins (Oxford, 1983), 99-129.
32. E. John, *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester, 1966), 7-8 (the Old Saxon *brēd* in *bredun giwald* corresponds to OE *brād*).
33. Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, I. 1 (ed. A.O. and M.O. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, Edinburgh, 1961, 200); P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968), no. 89 (= Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, no. 154).
34. C. Plummer (ed.), *Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896), i, 362. Cf. *The Annals of Ulster*, i, ed. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983), s.a. 750, which records, after the killing of Óengus's brother by the Britons, 'aithbe flatho Oengussa', which is to be translated 'the ebbing of the power of Óengus', not, as by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, 'end of the reign of Aengus'.
35. Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III. 2.
36. D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (London, 1971), 54 (on the Avar siege of Constantinople in AD 626).
37. For the A Version of the *Annales Cambriae* see E. Phillimore, 'The "Annales Cambriae" and Old-Welsh Genealogies from "Harleian MS" 3859', *Cy.*, 9 (1888), 154.
38. K. Hughes, 'The A-text of *Annales Cambriae*', in her *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in Celtic History 2 (Woodbridge, 1980), 88-92.
39. K. Grabowski and D. Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Mediaeval Ireland and Wales*, Studies in Celtic History 4 (Woodbridge, 1984), ch.4.
40. K. Hughes, 'The A-text of the *Annales Cambriae*', 92-8.
41. Cf. Hughes's discussion, *ibid.*, 93.
42. T. Jones, 'The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur', *NMS*, 8 (1964), 5.
43. D.N. Dumville in K. Grabowski and D. Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Mediaeval Ireland and Wales*, 211-24.
44. 'North British annals', *ibid.*, 209, and see also his review, *SC*, 12/13 (1977/8), 466-7, and K.H. Jackson, 'On the Northern British Section in Nennius', in N.K. Chadwick (ed.), *Celt and Saxon*

(Cambridge, 1963), 48-9, who calls it 'the Northern Chronicle'.

45. The other non-Irish entries before AD 600 in *Annales Cambriae* are not of a character to suggest early recording:

- (1) *AC*, s.a. 547, Maelgwn's obit, see D.N. Dumville, 'Gildas and Maelgwn: Problems of Dating', in M. Lapidge and D. Dumville (edd.), *Gildas: New Approaches*, Studies in Celtic History 5 (Woodbridge, 1984), 53.
- (2) There are two annals relating to the battle of Arfderydd and Gwrgi and Peredur (s.a. 573 and 580): for their subsequent literary importance see R. Bromwich, *TYP*, Notes to Personal Names under Peredur m. Elif(f)er Gosgorduavr.
- (3) The burial of Daniel is recorded s.a. 584 and the death of Dunawt ap Pabo s.a. 595. Daniel may have been regarded as a son of Dunawt, who was himself an important literary figure: see Bromwich, *TYP*, Notes to Personal Names, under Dunawt m. Pabo Post Prydein.

46. This suggestion, made by H.M. and N.K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, i (Cambridge, 1932), 154-5, has been accepted by Jackson and by Thomas Jones among others; it is still maintained, most recently, by R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', *SC*, 10/11 (1975-6), 169-72, and by Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend', *History*, 62 (1977), 188.

47. Gwrthefyr's four battles in c. 44 are unlike Arthur's twelve in c. 56 in the following respects:

- (1) the second battle is first given an English name and then provided with a Welsh equivalent; such a procedure does not suggest a Welsh poem as the source (see H.M. Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* [Cambridge, 1907], 41-2);
- (2) *iuxta lapidem tituli* may be related to Bede's supposed Kentish inscription for Hors in *Historia Ecclesiastica* I. 15, itself presumably taken from a Kentish source; in any case it does not seem to be the kind of detail one would expect to come from a poem;
- (3) the four battles lead directly to the theme of the failure to bury Gwrthefyr in a position which would have enabled him to repel invasion; but that theme is suggestive of Welsh prose not verse: see T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish Law', in *Medieval Settlement*, ed. P.H. Sawyer (London, 1976), 86-7.