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The Arthur of History

image: thirteenth-century, Matthew Paris, Epitome of Chronicles (Wikimedia Commons)

‘Did Arthur really exist?’

- a question often posed, cf. was St David a real person?
- St David supposedly died 1 March *c*. 600 (sainthood a posthumous affair) Life of St David written by Rhygyfarch ap Sulien (*obit* 1099) and it was adapted into Welsh *c*. 1346 by the anchorite of Llanddewibrefi, i.e. gap between texts about the individual and the period in which the individual was supposed to have lived.
- St David, like Arthur, became a national symbol. Cf also St Ursula – ‘relics’ found when city walls rebuilt at Cologne in C12th, medieval archaeological dig, Roman cemetery – whose bones?
- Was Arthur a fifth- or sixth-century British war leader (*dux bellorum* as described in the *Historia Brittonum*), known by C6th for being a military superhero?

Thomas Jones (1958) accepted : ‘the idea that there was a historical person of the name of Arthur early in the sixth century, who may have been one of the leaders of the Britons against their enemies’ (trans. Morgan 1964: 3)

Leslie Alcock (2001: 142) noted that it: ‘appeared that he [Arthur] was most probably a great British warrior of the late fifth and sixth centuries whose most important victory was the crushing defeat inflicted on the Anglo-Saxons at Badon.’

Several people called Arthur in sixth- seventh-century Wales and Scotland: do they reflect the commemoration of an earlier figure?

to counteract this…

- Thomas Green: ‘Many books, articles and web-pages simply make *a priori* assumption that there has to be a historical figure behind the Arthurian legends. Such an assumption is totally unjustified. As anyone at all familiar with medieval literature in general will know, the historicisation of non-historical/mythical personages – often through association with some important event of the past – is not in any way an unusual occurrence.’ ., ('The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur', p. 1)

Archaeological evidence
Cadbury castle, Somerset – Camelot?

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:050326_073_somerset_cadbury_castle.jpg

John Leland (1542) claimed that Cadbury was the location of King Arthur's Camelot.

Geoffrey Ashe (1981) argued that this was the site of the Arthur of history. He believed that a fifth-century king of the Britons Riotamus was the basis for Arthur.

Cadbury – a Bronze and Iron-Age hillfort excavated in late C19th and early C20th; in 1960s by Leslie Alcock and since 1992 by South Cadbury Environs Project.

The site was occupied from Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and reused by Roman troops; after their withdrawal c. 470-580 and in C11th was a Saxon mint.

Problem: archaeology proves the site was occupied but not by Arthur.

One might expect archaeology to be the only reliable source for the history of post-Roman Britain.

Thomas Green ‘archaeology cannot really help as it deals with sites not people’, (p. 1) – need reliable inscriptions to tie sites/monuments to people

Glastonbury – cross naming King Arthur as occupant of grave, reputedly ‘found’ by monks of Glastonbury in 1191; late twelfth-century ‘fraud’? From *c*. 1170 there was a copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae* at Glastonbury. According to Gerald of Wales Henry II suggested the excavation: the event conveniently confirmed Arthur was dead and associated his remain with current kings of England (Richard I at the time of discovery) – illustrated strength and legitimacy of Angevin rule over Wales.

Tintagel –early C6th inscribed stone, but does not mention Arthur; lots of pottery, luxury goods, site of great importance *c*. 450-*c* 600, royal residence? Geoffrey of Monmouth - Arthur conceived here; excavations started in 1933.

Textual evidence

Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘The Arthur of History’ in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, edited by Bromwich et al. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 15-32.

Was Arthur a real person?

‘Anyone is entitled to have his hunch, but before a hunch can have even the modest dignity of an informed guess it needs to be shaped by an understanding of the evidence’ p. 15

First consider the evidence (i.e. ‘early’ texts) in an unbiased fashion and then draw conclusions.

The ‘early’ texts:

Welsh poetry:

Y Gododdin (Gwawrddur cf Arthur – provided food for ravens on the walls of a fortress ‘ceni bei ef Arthur’ *although he was not Arthur*) C6th? Only occurs in B version not A version of Y Gododdin, Koch includes it in his reconstruction of the ‘original’ poem pre-A.D. 638; Graham Isaac C9th or C10th; believed to be historical by author of Y Gododdin?

Pa wr yw’r Porthor? (What Man is the Gatekeeper?), Geraint filius Erbin, Preiddiau Annwn (the Spoils of Annwn), Englynion y Beddau (Stanzas of the Grave), Ymddiddan Arthur a’r Eryr (The Dialogue of Arthur and the Eagle), other poems from the Book of Taliesin.

Historia Brittonum (829/30) ch 56 list of 12 battles against Germanic invaders – based on an earlier Welsh poem? Thought to be integral to the structure of HB.

Annales Cambriae (950s)

Historia Brittonum

David Dumville argued that the ‘Nennius’ Preface to HB was not part of the original text of 829/30 but added in later recensions.

HB cf genre of historical writing exemplified in early medieval Ireland – synthetic history – ‘an expression of national unity projected back into a legendary past’; no historian would place any trust in the literal truth of the narratives offered by such texts; they are interesting for the political and other interests of the authors, not about the periods about which they purport to write.

T. Charles-Edwards: the HB is first and foremost evidence for the HB, for the ideas, sources, culture and intentions of its author; HB = a source for the first half of C9th, not C5th and C6th; HB contains synthetic history but Dumville’s approach is too restrictive; a later source may be reliable even if we do not know from where it derived its information.

HB fuses the history of a people with ecclesiastical history (as do other early histories) – it is not merely synthetic history – one day we may we be able to conclude that HB contains some useful information about the C6th but that at the moment 'the prospects are poor' (p. 229)

'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 Wales.' p. 28 author fuses sources for his own political ends; other mythic characters (e.g. Hengest and Horsa) are portrayed as historical.

List of battles (ch 56) often seen as more 'historic' than the *Mirabilia* (wonders ch 73). Yet some of the legends associated with Arthur as folkloric figure pre-date C9th according to Bromwich.

Battle of Badon mentioned in HB same as Battle of Badon Hill mentioned by Gildas in his *De Excidio Britanniae* (but Gildas doesn't mention Arthur and Padel points out that the lack of paragraph break in the original MS suggests that Ambrosius Aurelianus was the leader at Badon, as well as the other battles).

Battle originally fought by another victor became associated with Arthur from C9th?

Much debate on dates and identification/location of battles.

‘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.’ (p. 29)

Green – was HB more akin to sermonizing than history as such?

Annales Cambriae (compiled 950s?)

- Brief descriptions of significant events in British and Irish history with particular emphasis on Wales (covering 477 to 954)
- Earliest manuscript C11th also contains HB;
- Two references to Arthur:

  516 The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus for three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were the victors.

  537 The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell.

Jones (1964) and Alcock (1971) inclined to see these as a contemporary record of Arthur and proof he existed.

Hughes (1980), Dumville (1984) and Charles-Edwards (1991) early annals – up to 613 thought to be based on the *Chronicle of Ireland* but put together later in C10th and later entries (613 to 777) based on north British sources associated with St Davids in particular.

Pre-613 entries ‘retrospective interpolations’ (Green)

Higham (2013 ‘Early Latin Sources’) argued that the compiler of *Annales Cambriae* had a particular reason to venerate Arthur as a historical figure since the battle leader was traditionally seen as the ancestor of the ruling house of Deheubarth, the Welsh kingdom in which the annals were most likely collated.

HB and AC differ in their accounts? Does this make them unreliable witnesses? Are they derived from the same sources, different sources or is AC derived from HB (both have probable confusion between Old Welsh *scuit* (shield) and *scuid* (shoulder)?

Geoffrey of Monmouth
Historia regum Britanniae c. 1139

Geoffrey of Monmouth gave the impression that Arthur was a credible, historical character and his was work was highly influential.

According to Karen Jankulak:

‘It was of central importance to Geoffrey that his tale be told in a suitably ‘historical’ fashion, without gaps and with properly believable characters and events. Instead of a disconnected and disinterested journey through the antiquities of Britain, he sought to adapt the more sustained narratives of Gildas, the *Historia Brittonum* and the overarching narratives of Celtic synthetic history that located their local histories imaginatively within the mainstream of Classical, Biblical and European history. His narrative had the most enduring influence of all histories of Britain. The chief beneficiary of this, arguably, was Arthur, who remains Geoffrey’s enduring legacy. Geoffrey took the Arthur of *Historia Brittonum* and placed him among a host of historically respectable figures, some such as Maxen and Carausius, who were secure in their historicity, albeit in the process of acquiring legendary accretions. As a literary and historical figure, Arthur was profoundly important, in Welsh as much as in European tradition.’ (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, pp. 103-4)

Oliver Padel – in HB the *Mirabilia* is just as important as the list of Battles

- In Pre-Galfridian sources Arthur is a legendary figure that belongs to the realm of mythology – defending Britain from supernatural forces, slaying giants and witches, boars and wild cats and taking part in legendary heroic battles.
- This is consistent with the early Welsh poetry and *Culhwch ac Olwen*; none of these mention the Battle of Badon; cf Fionn in Gaelic literature a mythical character who became historicised and was associated with a list of battles; important to look at the whole body of pre-Galfridian texts not only HB in isolation.

- Existence of Arthur (whether he lived and even died) has been a matter of active and vigorous debate since at least the twelfth century.
- During the visit of a group of canons from Laon, France, to Bodmin, Cornwall in 1113. One of the canons expressed his incredulity when a local claimed that Arthur was still alive. The result was an angry confrontation that almost led to a riot. (See Jankulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, p. 75)

- Was Arthur a mythical figure being used as a historical figure in literary sources or was he a historical figure being mythicized?

- Rather than ‘Did Arthur ever exist?’, are these more useful questions when studying Arthurian literature:
- What was a given text’s perception of Arthur?
- Does the treatment of Arthur vary according to the genre of the text in question and its author’s purpose?
- How significant is it that by the ninth century there existed a concept of Arthur as a historical figure?
- Can we assume a character existed if early medieval sources say that he/she existed?
- What is the nature of the pre-Galfridian sources?
- By searching for a realistic ‘historical’ Arthur are we ignoring the much more interesting mythical and magical Arthur of early literature?

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