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The Nature of Arthur

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'DID Arthur exist? The only honest answer is, "We do not know, but he may well have existed."' Over thirty years ago two leading Celticists, Thomas Jones and Kenneth Jackson, in articles written independently but appearing almost at the same time, came to precisely this conclusion.¹ Since that time the discussion has hardly changed. The best recent article on the subject, while wisely recommending that the question should be postponed until several others have first been examined, finally comes to the same conclusion.² It is understandable that the discussion should not have changed, since hardly any new evidence has come to light; but, in the intervening period, Jackson's possibility has hardened into a probability. Arthur has had a historical age named after him, as well as numerous books concerned with historical matters, and it has become common ground that 'The original Arthur was probably a sixth-century battle-leader of the Britons against the English'. It is the aim here to re-examine the same well-turned evidence, with the suggestion that a better answer to the opening question would be 'He may very well *not* have existed'; and, indeed, that the cumulative evidence is such as to make that a probability.

The method by which Jones and Jackson worked was identical: they examined all the evidence which is likely to be earlier than the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *History of the Kings of Britain*, with its glorification of Arthur as king and international

¹Thomas Jones, 'Datblygiadau Cynnar Chwedl Arthur', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 17 (1956-58), 235-52, translated by Gerald Morgan as 'The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur', *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 8 (1964), 3-21; K. H. Jackson, 'The Arthur of History', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, edited by Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, 1959), pp. 1-11 (p. 1). Jackson's article should be taken together with his other chapter, 'Arthur in Early Welsh Verse', *ibid.*, pp. 12-19, since the two cover the same ground as Jones. ²Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Arthur of History', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, edited by Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 15-32 (p. 29).

warlord, was completed shortly before 1139, and quickly became widely influential throughout western Europe.³ It is that same body of evidence which must be examined here; but by examining it in a different order, and with a different emphasis, it can be seen to point in precisely the opposite direction. The intention is to show how the nature of the inquiry, which hitherto has always started with the natural question 'Was there a historical Arthur?', has determined its outcome ('Yes, perhaps'), whereas, if the collective evidence is first allowed to speak for itself, its weight is quite different.

The first text to be examined is naturally the *Historia Brittonum*, formerly attributed to Nennius.⁴ Although its importance as an Arthurian text is universally appreciated, it is not often sufficiently emphasized that it is the earliest one that we have. The main reason this is sometimes overlooked is that one or two references in early Welsh poetry, notoriously impossible to date securely, may have some claim to being earlier. These will be discussed briefly below, but meanwhile the dating of the *Historia Brittonum* to 829–30 is satisfactorily secure, and its place as the earliest datable text concerning Arthur deserves to be emphasized.⁵ What is notable is that it shows us that the legend of Arthur was already in a dual state. On the one hand there is the apparently historical Arthur of Chapter 56, fighting the English in the sixth century as 'dux bellorum', with the well-known list of the sites of his twelve battles. On the other hand, however, there is another section which mentions Arthur, and is of equal weight to Chapter 56: that which lists the *Mirabilia* of the Island of Britain (Chapters 67–75). Among these are two which mention Arthur, both located in the Welsh borders (Chapter 73).⁶ Each explains a remarkable feature of the landscape, and also its name, by means of a story relating to Arthur. The first *mirabile* concerns the hunting of the great boar *Troit*, and tells that Arthur's dog, curiously called by a name meaning 'horse', *Cabal* (Modern

³For the date, see *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, I, A Single-Manuscript Edition from Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568, edited by Neil Wright (Cambridge, 1985), pp. xii–xvi. ⁴Cited from Nennius: *British History and the Welsh Annals*, edited and translated by John Morris (Chichester, 1980); Morris took his text from *Chronica Minora*, III, edited by Theodor Mommsen, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi, 13 (Berlin, 1898), pp. 111–222. See also *The Historia Brittonum*, III: The 'Vatican' Recension, edited by D. N. Dumville (Cambridge, 1985). ⁵David N. Dumville, 'Some Aspects of the Chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*', *BBCS*, 25 (1972–74), 439–45 (pp. 439–40); '“Nennius” and the *Historia Brittonum*', *Studia Celtica*, 10/11 (1975–76), 78–95 (p. 78); *Vatican Recension*, p. 3; and 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Arthurian Literature*, 6 (1986), 1–26 (pp. 5 and 25). ⁶*Nennius*, edited by Morris, p. 83. The *Mirabilia* were probably part of the original text of the *Historia Brittonum* of 829–30, according to Dumville, 'Historical Value', p. 22 and n. 69.

Welsh *Cafall*),⁷ in the heat of the chase left its pawprint (or hoof-print?) in a remarkable rock on top of a mountain. People may come to remove the rock, but next day it will always be found to have returned to its place. The rock is called *Carn Cabal*, 'Cafall's rock-pile' (or 'hoof': the Welsh word *carn* is ambiguous); this is now Corn Gafallt, a hill near Rhaeadr, and the allusion is evidently to one of three prehistoric cairns on its southern brow.⁸ The particular importance of this story is that the *porcus Troit* hunted by Arthur is evidently the same as the great boar *Twrch Trwyth*, whose chase forms the climax of the later Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*. The *Mirabilia* show that in the early ninth century the core of that tale already existed, and that Arthur was already its hero.

The other *mirabile* involving Arthur is located in the region called *Ercing* (Archenfield, in Herefordshire). It relates that Arthur killed his own son, called Amr, in combat, and buried him there in a tumulus. This story is not otherwise known, so the circumstances of the killing are lost, but it brings to mind the story that the Irish hero Cú Chulainn accidentally killed his own son without having recognized him—a story found in other cultures too⁹—and also the allusions in early Welsh poetry to another son of Arthur, called Llachau, who was apparently slain treacherously.¹⁰ The *Historia Brittonum* relates that Amr's grave is visited by people who try to measure its length, but it varies between six and fifteen feet. The tomb is said to be located by a spring called *Licat Amr*, 'the eye [or source] of Amr'.¹¹ The usual identification of this is Gamber Head, a spring at the source of the river Gamber in Herefordshire; if this is correct, then the 'grave' will have been the now-destroyed tumulus close by, called Wormelow Tump, the ancient meeting-place of the Hundred of Wormelow. However, a recent suggestion locates *Licat Amr* instead at the head of the river Garren, on Garway Hill, five

⁷Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', in *Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 33–71 (pp. 68–69, n. 113); Brynley F. Roberts, 'Culhwch ac Olwen, the Triads, Saints' Lives', *ibid.*, pp. 73–95 (p. 91). ⁸*Culhwch and Olwen: An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (Cardiff, 1992), pp. lxxv–lxxvii. Corn Gafallt is at Grid Reference SN 9464, and the cairns at SN 942643. A candidate for the stone is illustrated in *The Mabinogion from the Llyfr Coch o Hergest*, translated by Lady Charlotte Guest, 3 vols (London, 1849), II, 360. On the occasion of my visit on 20 February 1993, the stone illustrated by Lady Guest was not readily apparent. No doubt it had been removed less than a day previously, and was still on its way back. ⁹Tom Peete Cross, 'A Note on "Sohrab and Rustum"', *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 1 (1949–50), 176–82; Kenneth Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), pp. 70–71. ¹⁰Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', pp. 39, 43–44, and 46. ¹¹It is generally agreed that this is the intended reading; the manuscripts have variants including *Licat Anir* and *oculus Amr*: *Nennius*, edited by Morris, Chapter 73; Mommsen, p. 217.

miles away.¹² In either case, we may envisage that the grave was probably a Neolithic or Bronze Age burial-chamber or tumulus, similar to another one fourteen miles away, called Arthur's Stone, and first recorded under that name in the thirteenth century.¹³

These two *mirabilia* are clearly at variance with the 'historical' Arthur in Chapter 56 of the same work. The milieu is one of magic: wonderful animals, supernatural events, and remarkable features in the landscape which need to be explained, and which *can* be explained by reference to Arthur and his attendant legends. The process can alternatively be seen as the use of notable features in the landscape to give local concreteness and credence to Arthur and his legends. This is exactly the world, and the mood, of the Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, which shares some of the material, but it is in marked contrast with the sober world of historical records. This contrast, found in our earliest Arthurian text, needs to be emphasized. It has usually been explained on the basis that here we see the historical Arthur already becoming a figure of local legend.¹⁴ This begs the question of what can be known of Arthur *before* the date of this, our earliest text; but for the time being what is important is the dual nature of the legend at its first appearance—the mixture of magical folklore and apparent history.

The next piece of evidence has much in common with the *Mirabilia*. This is a well-known account of a journey to Britain made in 1113 by some canons of Laon, in northern France.¹⁵ The nine canons had been sent on a tour to raise funds for their monastery after a fire the previous year. Tatlock has shown that the account, written in about 1145 by a monk called Herman (possibly Hermann of Tournai), was substantially compiled at about the time of the visit in 1113, and that no grounds have been found for thinking that anything significant was added by Herman at the later date.¹⁶ For

¹²Gamber Head is at SO 494295, and Wormelow Tump nearby was at SO 492302. The head of the river Garren is at SO 441251; there is a possible long barrow in the surrounding moorland. Either of these tumuli might thus qualify as Amr's grave, depending upon one's preference for the headstream of the river *Amr* or Gamber: Bruce Coplestone-Crow, *Herefordshire Place-Names* (Oxford, 1989), p. 91. My thanks to John Freeman for advice on Herefordshire place-names and topography. ¹³At SO 318430; *A Descriptive Catalogue of Ancient Deeds in the Public Record Office*, 6 vols (London, 1890–1915), I, no. B.1275. ¹⁴Jones, 'Early Evolution', p. 11: 'non-heroic stories had begun to gather round the heroic tradition of Arthur by the tenth century'; Jackson, 'Arthur of History', p. 1: 'Both [*mirabilia*] show that the Arthur story had already impressed itself on the landscape, in the form of "local legends", at least as early as the beginning of the ninth century'. ¹⁵*De Miraculis Sanctae Mariae Laudunensis*, II.15–16, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by J.-P. Migne, 156, cols 961–1018 (col. 983); E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, revised edition (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 18, 184, and 249. ¹⁶J. S. P. Tatlock, 'The English Journey of the Laon Canons', *Speculum*, 8 (1933), 454–65.

present purposes the difference between the two dates is anyway immaterial, since the later date, a mere six years after the completion of Geoffrey's *History*, is effectively pre-Galfridian when we consider the possibility of his written *History* having affected local Cornish or Breton folklore. Although his work was widely influential within decades of its completion—a comparatively unusual event for a written work in the Middle Ages—its influence would have been restricted at first to the literate classes. Here we are concerned with evidence for popular folklore and local traditions; these could well have been receptive to written themes, but such influence will not have occurred overnight.

The canons' trip took them round much of southern England, including Devon and Cornwall. Between Exeter and Bodmin, they were shown the 'seat' and 'oven' of that king Arthur, renowned according to legends of the British, and were told that this was 'Arthurian country', *terra Arturi* ('ostenderunt nobis cathedram, et furnum illius famosi secundum fabulas Britannorum regis Arturi, ipsamque terram eiusdem Arturi esse dicebant'). Of the 'seat' nothing is known, but a good candidate exists for the 'oven'. The route from Exeter to Bodmin would have taken the travellers either across or around two wild upland regions: Dartmoor, in Devon, and Bodmin Moor, in Cornwall. On Dartmoor there was a feature which, in the next century, was known as the 'king's oven', *furnus regis*. In the middle of that large tract of moorland, it was prominent enough to be used later as a marker in the bounds of the royal forest of Dartmoor; hence its mention in 1240.¹⁷ It is thought to be an old tin-smelting furnace; if the equation with 'Arthur's oven' is right, it would need to have been ancient already by the twelfth century, to have been given this fanciful and legendary name. The name 'King's Oven' could theoretically be due to the royal ownership of the forest of Dartmoor. That seems unlikely, however, since the forest did not belong to the king at the time when the bounds were recorded, but to his brother Richard, earl of Cornwall. The identification is not important for present purposes: if the 'Arthur's oven' seen by the

¹⁷King's Oven, Grid Reference SX 674812; Samuel Rowe, *A Perambulation of the Antient and Royal Forest of Dartmoor and the Venville Precincts*, third edition, edited by J. Brooking Rowe (Exeter, 1896), p. 290 (cf. pp. 195–96); Chambers, p. 184; J. V. Somers Cocks, 'The Boundary of Dartmoor on the North-Eastern Side', *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 30 (1965–67), 214–19. There is another, independent, attestation of the place-name, in the boundary-clause of an undated thirteenth-century Devon charter, which could be earlier in date: Cornwall County Record Office, ARB 108/272 (temporary reference); however, this has the form *fornus domini regis*, which lends support to a contemporary explanation of the name, and undermines the identification offered here.

canons of Laon is not to be equated with that later landmark, then its site is unknown, like that of his 'seat'. Both were in either Devon or Cornwall, and were presumably either natural rocks or antiquities. The interest of this material is its close similarity to the earlier folklore of the *Historia Brittonum*. Both deal with features of the landscape, situated (where identifiable) in wild parts of the country, on hills or moorlands. In other words, the Arthur seen here is that of Chapter 73, not Chapter 56, of the *Historia Brittonum*.

The next piece of pre-Geoffrey evidence to be considered is closely related to the last item, but comes from Scotland. It is the only evidence which might be called 'new' since the time of the articles by Jones and Jackson. Although the material was known earlier, it was only in 1975 that it was drawn to the attention of Celticists, and its significance made clear.¹⁸ It comes from an 'encyclopaedia' completed in 1120 by Lambert of St Omer. In his list of *mirabilia* of the island of Britain, he cited one which had not appeared among those of the *Historia Brittonum*. It is a building, supposed to have been a 'palace' of Arthur the soldier, located in Pictland, and bearing sculpted on it his deeds and battles ('Est palatium in Brittaniam in terra Pictorum Arturi militis, arte mirabili et uarietate fundatum, in quo factorum bellorumque eius omnium gesta sculpta uidentur').¹⁹ This is now generally accepted as referring to a circular building of Roman date near Stirling, known as 'Arthur's oven' in the thirteenth century, and destroyed in the eighteenth.²⁰ The similarity of its later name to the *furnus Arturi* in Devon does not need to be stressed: it is remarkable that two pieces of folklore so closely similar should appear among our sparse medieval records of local Arthurian legends, and at opposite ends of the country. Naturally there is no reason to give one priority over the other, as recent enthusiasts wishing to locate a historical Arthur (and even 'Camelot') in Scotland have done: the point is rather that both areas, and the others mentioned above and below, can all claim pre-Galfridian local folklore about the hero, and that on present evidence no one region can claim a monopoly, nor priority, of the legend.

The next category of evidence is the Lives of saints; their contri-

¹⁸David N. Dumville, 'The *Liber Floridus* of Lambert of Saint-Omer and the *Historia Brittonum*', *BBCS*, 26 (1974-76), 103-22 (p. 107). See also his 'Celtic-Latin Texts in Northern England, c. 1150-c. 1250', *Celtica*, 12 (1977), 19-49 (pp. 22-24). ¹⁹Dumville, 'Liber Floridus', p. 107. ²⁰K. A. Steer, 'Arthur's O'on: A Lost Shrine of Roman Britain', *Archaeological Journal*, 115 (1958), 99-110; Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Stirlingshire: An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments*, 1 (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 117-18; Iain Gordon Brown and Peter G. Vasey, 'Arthur's O'on Again: Newly-Discovered Drawings by John Adair, and their Context', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 119 (1989), 353-60; first called *furnus Arturi* in 1293, Dumville, 'Liber Floridus', p. 107 and n. 8.

bution to Arthurian literature has been comparatively neglected.²¹ The significant ones for our knowledge of the Arthurian legend are, from Wales, the Lives of Cadog (by Lifris), Carannog, Illtud, and Padarn (all from one manuscript), and of Gildas; from Brittany, those of Goeznou and Efflam.²² Not all of these Lives necessarily date from before the completion of Geoffrey's *History*, and the manuscripts are all of later date. In most of them Arthur's function is to act as a foil to the saint, in order to emphasize the saint's virtue or power by contrast with Arthur, to the latter's disadvantage. However, Arthur is not usually portrayed as an evil and pagan tyrant, as are rulers in many other saints' Lives from the Celtic countries. He is unruly or unpredictable, but open to negotiation. He plays his fullest part in Lifris's *Life of St Cadog*, which is agreed to be datable to within ten years of 1100, though with additions from later in the twelfth century. The Arthurian sections are in the main body of the text, and therefore date from close to 1100, well before Geoffrey's *History*. They concern Arthur and his companions Cai and Bedwyr, described first as 'three valiant heroes' (*tres heroes strenui*), though Arthur is later also called 'the most illustrious king of Britain' (*rex illustrissimus Britannie*).²³ They are first discovered sitting on a hill-top playing at dice—a circumstance similar to the start of an episode in *Culhwch and Olwen*, a tale in which Cai and Bedwyr are also Arthur's regular companions.²⁴ The heroes witness the abduction of a princess (who is destined to become mother of the saint) and her father's pursuit of the abductor: Arthur's first reaction is to join in and abduct her for himself, but his companions remind him that they are meant to help those in need or distress.²⁵ The fullest Arthurian episode, however, is a local legend (also a place-name story) which relates how Arthur refused to accept normal cattle as compensation for a man of his who had been killed, and demanded ones of a special magical colour, red in front and white behind. With the saint's assistance these were conjured up, but they turned into bracken when handed over to him at a ford—hence the place-names *Tref redinauc*, 'ferny farm', and *Rith guarteibou*, 'ford

²¹C. Grant Loomis, 'King Arthur and the Saints', *Speculum*, 8 (1933), 478-82; J. S. P. Tatlock, 'The Dates of the Arthurian Saints' Legends', *ibid.*, 14 (1939), 345-65; Roberts, 'Culhwch ac Olwen, the Triads, Saints' Lives', pp. 82-85. ²²*Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, edited by A. W. Wade-Evans (Cardiff, 1944); Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature 400-1200* (Dublin, 1985), nos 34 + 96 (Cadog), 107 (Carannog), 97 (Illtud), and 103 (Padarn); 37 (Gildas); 959 (Goeznou) and 913 (Efflam). ²³*Vitae Sanctorum*, pp. 26 and 68. The terminology used to describe Arthur and his men needs further investigation. ²⁴*Culhwch*, edited by Bromwich and Evans, line 953; *The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, revised edition (London, 1974), p. 127; cf. Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', p. 39. ²⁵*Vitae Sanctorum*, p. 26.

of rejoinders' (or 'of refusals'?). At this demonstration of Cadog's power Arthur asked for the saint's forgiveness, and confirmed upon his monastery the right of sanctuary for fugitive criminals. The milieu here is again that of *Culhwch*, Arthur being associated with magic, wonderful animals, and with local legends including, as in *Culhwch* and the *mirabilia*, local place-names which are explained by means of a story in which Arthur plays a central role.

The other Life to be considered here is that of St Carannog, which is of significance because it locates Arthur in Somerset, a region not yet covered in this survey. The dealings between saint and king are here thoroughly amicable, though on a strictly businesslike footing. The text relates that, after crossing the estuary of the river Severn into Somersét, St Carannog was met by Arthur, again termed *rex*. He asked the saint to rid the land of a dragon. St Carannog did so without trouble, thus demonstrating his superiority to Arthur, and in return was given back his altar (which Arthur had unsuccessfully been trying to use as a table), and was also given the *arx* ('hill-fort') of *Carrum*, Carhampton in Somerset. Immediately after the dragon episode, the action of this brief Life moves to Cornwall,²⁶ without any indication of the change. Arthur seems to be envisaged as in authority there too, so the two regions may have been seen as one by the Welsh author. This Life is to be dated to sometime in the twelfth century, so it need not pre-date Geoffrey's *History*, but its episodes concerning the dragon and the local legends owe nothing to him. The location of Arthur in Cornwall can be attributed to his dwelling at *Kelli Wic* in Cornwall, according to early Welsh literature, but his location in Somerset could hardly be due to that, except by a rather liberal equation of Cornwall with the whole south-western peninsula. Arthur is also located in Somerset in two other texts from Wales, the *Dialogue of Melwas and Gwenhwyfar* and Caradog of Llancarfan's *Life of St Gildas*, both alluding to a legend located at Glastonbury.²⁷ The latter was written sometime in the 1120s or 1130s, so it too can owe nothing to Geoffrey's *History*.²⁸

In south-west England we now have early folklore or legends locating Arthur in Somerset (certainly) and Devon (probably—or Cornwall); the next item is certainly located in Cornwall. This is a further incident in the journey of the Laon canons in 1113. While they were at Bodmin, effecting cures and thereby raising funds for

their house, an argument arose. A local man, who had come to have his withered arm healed, maintained that Arthur was not dead, 'in just the same way as the Bretons are in the habit of arguing against the French on King Arthur's behalf'. It is unknown how this conversation arose (perhaps because of the sights already seen by the canons on their journey), but someone in the entourage of the cultured Frenchmen was rash enough to scoff at this local belief. The discussion swiftly spread among the local bystanders, and became heated. A riot would have ensued, had not a local cleric called Algar intervened.²⁹ The point of narrating the episode then appears: the argument must have displeased Our Lady of Laon, for the man with the withered arm, who had raised a riot on Arthur's behalf ('qui pro Arturo tumultum fecerat'), failed to receive a cure from her relics. It has been suggested that this man must have been a Breton, on the grounds that a Cornishman at this date would have been too downtrodden to have dared to speak up.³⁰ This can easily be refuted: the Cornish were no more downtrodden at this date than the Welsh were in, say, 1350. In any case, the fact that a riot was imminent demonstrates that the topic was a matter of strong feeling among the local population in general, not merely among an incoming Breton upper class.

Herman's own comment on the episode demonstrates two further points. First, it tells us that the Bretons, as well as the Cornish, had strong feelings about Arthur's return. This is almost the only piece of evidence about the state of the legend in Brittany at this period,³¹ but it is enough to demonstrate the vitality of the legend there before Geoffrey's time, or anyway before his work can have had an effect upon popular folklore (even if the comment is dated c. 1145 rather than 1113). It would be interesting to know what it was that the Bretons expected Arthur to achieve on his return. In Britain the hope is usually linked with the need for a saviour against the English intruders, but by the twelfth century the Bretons might not have had strong feelings about the need to expel the English from Britain. In that case, the legend of Arthur's return may not have been intrinsically, or originally, linked with the idea of his defence of Britain

²⁶The name of the river *Guellit* in the *Life*, where Carannog's altar landed next, and where he then founded another monastery called *Carrov* (*Vitae Sanctorum*, p. 146), is *Gwills* (anciently *Willit*) in the parish of Crantock (= Welsh *Carannog*), in Cornwall; the Cornish name of the churchtown there was *Langorrou*. ²⁷Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', pp. 58–61. ²⁸Christopher N. L. Brooke, *The Church and the Welsh Border in the Central Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1986), p. 42.

²⁹'sicut Britones solent iurgari cum Francis pro rege Arturo, idem vir coepit rixari cum uno ex famulis nostris . . . dicens adhuc Arturum vivere. Unde non parvo tumultu exorto, cum armis ecclesiam irruunt plurimi, et nisi prefatus Algardus clericus obstitisset, pene usque ad sanguinis effusionem ventum fuisset': *PL*, 156, col. 983; on Algar's later career see Tatlock, 'English Journey', p. 462. ³⁰E. M. R. Ditmas, 'Breton Settlers in Cornwall after the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1978, pp. 11–39 (p. 35). ³¹The late-attested *Life of St Goeznou* (n. 22 above) and the *Livre des faits d'Arthur* are the only other evidence, to my knowledge: see Gw. Le Duc, 'L'*Historia Britannica* avant Geoffroy de Monmouth', *Annales de Bretagne*, 79 (1972), 819–35.

against the English. It is notable that the tenth-century Welsh poem *Armes Prydein*, 'The Prophecy of Britain', aimed at mustering British and other forces to attack the English, makes no use of Arthur as a rallying call, though it does use other legendary figures such as Merlin.³²

Herman's comment also shows that the French already knew by this date (again, 1113, or at the latest c. 1145) that denying Arthur's return was a good way to provoke a Breton. This raises the question: how widespread was knowledge of Arthur in France, before Geoffrey's *History* became generally known? And, further, was the popularity of Geoffrey's *History* on the Continent due partly to a previous knowledge of Arthur, or was it solely his *History* which spread that fame? The awareness of how to annoy a Breton might have been restricted to Frenchmen who were in regular intercourse with Bretons, or it might have been more widely current. If it was already widespread in France, then Herman may have mentioned the 'seat' and 'oven' because they would be of intrinsic interest to readers there who had already heard of Arthur. On the other hand, if that awareness was more restricted, then mentioning them might have been felt to be a necessary preliminary, in order to explain to Continental readers the later scoffing of the French servant who had heard his fill of the local tales.³³

There is further early evidence for the same belief of Arthur's not being dead, this time in Wales. It is provided by William of Malmesbury, writing in the mid-1120s. He states:

Sed Arturis sepulcrum nusquam visitur, unde antiquitas naeniarum adhuc eum venturum fabulatur. Ceterum, alterius bustum, ut praemisi, tempore Willelmi regis repertum est supra oram maris, quatuordecim pedes longum; ubi a quibusdam asseritur ab hostibus vulneratus, et naufragio eiectus.

But Arthur's grave is nowhere seen, whence antiquity of fables still claims that he will return. However, the grave of the other [Walwen, Arthur's nephew], as I have stated, was found in the time of King William upon the seashore, fourteen feet long; where he is asserted by some to have been wounded by enemies, and cast out from a shipwreck.³⁴

³²*Armes Prydein: The Prophecy of Britain, from the Book of Taliesin*, edited by Sir Ifor Williams, English version by Rachel Bromwich (Dublin, 1972); for the date, see David N. Dumville, 'Brittany and "Armes Prydein Vawr"', *Études celtiques*, 20 (1983), 146–59. ³³For early knowledge of the Arthurian legend in Brittany, see also references given by Roger Sherman Loomis, 'The Oral Diffusion of the Arthurian Legend', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (n. 1 above), pp. 52–63, and by J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'Brittany and the Arthurian Legend', in *Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 249–72. ³⁴*Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi De Gesis Regum Anglorum Libri Quinque*, edited by William Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series (London, 1887–89), II, 342 (III.287); cf. Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', pp. 49–50.

Once again we have evidence, before Geoffrey's *History*, that the Arthurian legend was associated with a remarkable feature in the landscape: the fourteen-foot grave is reminiscent of the variable-length grave of Arthur's son Amr in Herefordshire. Widespread belief in Arthur's return is further confirmed by three more pieces of evidence. One is a well-known line of Welsh verse in the Black Book of Carmarthen which is to be translated 'the world's wonder, a grave for Arthur', implying that, unlike other heroes, he did not have a known grave, perhaps because he was rumoured not to be dead. Like other references in early Welsh poetry, the line is impossible to date securely; it could be earlier or later than Geoffrey's time.³⁵ The second confirmation of William of Malmesbury comes from an Anglo-Norman poetic text, *The Description of England*, currently dated to the 1140s. It states of the Welsh:

Apertement le vont disant, . . .
Ka la parfin tute lauerunt
Par Arthur la receuuerunt, . . .
E Bretagne lapelerunt.

Openly they go about saying, . . .
that in the end they will have it all;
by means of Arthur, they will have it back . . .
They will call it Britain again.³⁶

At the time of this text the Welsh apparently claimed that, with Arthur's help, they would expel the English and the Normans from Britain. The final piece of early evidence for this belief comes, surprisingly, from Geoffrey himself. He carefully states that Arthur was 'mortally wounded' (*letaliter uulneratus*) in the final battle of the river Camblan, but then relates that he was removed to the island of Avallon 'to have his wounds healed' ('ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus').³⁷ The obvious explanation for this otherwise glaring inconsistency is that the legend of Arthur's not being dead was already known, at least among Cornish-, Welsh-, and Breton-speakers, and that Geoffrey's ambiguous wording was

³⁵'anoeth bid bet y arthur', *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*, edited by A. O. H. Jarman (Cardiff, 1982), no. 18, 'Englynion y Beddau', line 135 (p. 41); cf. Jones, 'Early Evolution', pp. 17–18, and Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', pp. 49–50. ³⁶*Lestorie des Engles solum la Translacion Maistre Geffrei Gaimar*, edited by T. D. Hardy and C. T. Martin, Rolls Series, 2 vols (London, 1888–89), I, 287 (text), and II, 213–14 (editors' translation). See John Gillingham, 'The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 13 (1990), 99–118 (p. 112). ³⁷*Historia Regum Britannie*, edited by Wright, I, §178; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 261.

designed not to conflict with it—a very typical instance of Geoffrey both having his cake and eating it, yielding to sober and cultured Norman views of what should have happened, while simultaneously providing an escape clause for those who wished to take the romantic view based upon Celtic legend.

It is now appropriate to turn to the evidence of literature in the Welsh language, but only briefly, for it has recently been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.³⁸ It is this corpus which rightly has always provided the chief body of evidence for those examining the legend. However, part of the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that this emphasis has, at the same time, distorted the overall picture, as if the other pieces of evidence, from Cornwall, Brittany, and Scotland, exist only to supplement the Welsh evidence, as pale reflections of it, whereas the purpose here is to use the fuller Welsh evidence to amplify the picture from other areas. It will be clear by now that Cornwall and Brittany, as well as part of Scotland, have as good a claim as Wales to oral tales about Arthur in the pre-Galfridian period. So the Welsh material can be used to give an idea of what may have existed in its own right in the other countries, not of what those lands might have borrowed from Wales.

Most of the references to Arthur in early Welsh literature confirm the above picture of Arthur's natural world. The various pieces of evidence are in fact remarkably consistent. The prose tale *Culhwch and Olwen* is the fullest and most informative of the Welsh records of the Arthurian legend, and it shows the kind of background which can be envisaged for the local legends from Scotland, south-west England, and perhaps Brittany, though the information from the last is not sufficiently full.³⁹ The text, much as we have it, is generally dated to around 1100, though as usual the manuscripts are considerably later and the possibility of later accretions is admitted.⁴⁰ As in the *Mirabilia* and the saints' Lives, Arthur moves in a world of magic and of wonderful animals; as in those texts and the other items, he is a presence in the landscape, with his adventures giving rise to known place-names, especially in the wilder parts of the country. In essence, these wild and rocky landscapes are Arthur's natural environment. The very name of his court in Cornwall, *Kelli Wic*, 'the forest grove', reinforces this impression. Arthur's domain is where other people do not live. If *Kelli Wic* is identifiable at all, it is probably to be equated with some ancient monument, not necessarily an actual Dark Age ruler's court, in keeping with the other

evidence and with the imaginative atmosphere of the Welsh tale.⁴¹ In addition, it is noticeable that Arthur is without a genealogy in *Culhwch*. The text provides him with relations on his mother's side, but no father or other genealogy is given. This all combines to produce a picture of Arthur as a hero who is somehow outside society—the 'wonderful, irresponsible atmosphere of an Arthurian past'.⁴² He and his band of warriors are akin to the *fianna*, bands of youths in Ireland who apparently used to roam the countryside, living temporarily or permanently outside normal society.⁴³ The primary definition of early Irish *fian* perfectly describes Arthur and his followers as seen in this tale: 'a band of roving men whose principal occupations were hunting and war'.⁴⁴

The Welsh poetic texts confirm this impression of Arthur's natural environment. The two principal texts are those known as *The Spoils of Annwn* and 'What Man is Porter?'. Both have been discussed fully in recent years.⁴⁵ For *The Spoils of Annwn* there is no close parallel. It may be related to an episode in *Culhwch* about an overseas expedition to Ireland to obtain the magical cauldron of the giant Diwrnach, and possibly to Geoffrey's statement of Arthur's removal to the island of Avallon to have his wounds healed after the battle of the river Camblan.⁴⁶ 'What Man is Porter?' is even more closely related to *Culhwch*. It shares with it a knowledge of several episodes concerned with fictional Welsh heroes; its general world is one in which Arthur or his men fight battles against human or supernatural enemies, including cynocephali (dog-headed men), witches, and Palug's Cat (which may be one tricked into attacking its own reflection, according to a later English story).⁴⁷

Finally, there is the single line from the group of poems known as the *Gododdin*, commemorating a disastrous sixth-century expedition against the English by a group of British warriors based at Edinburgh. A hero called Gwawddur 'fed black ravens on the rampart of a fort, although he was no Arthur' (*gochore brein du ar uur / caer ceni bei ef arthur*).⁴⁸ Too much weight has been attached to this one line. It is essentially undatable, as is much of the *Gododdin*, different

³⁸Arthur of the Welsh, passim. ³⁹Culhwch, edited by Bromwich and Evans; *Mabinogion*, translated by Jones and Jones, pp. 95–136. ⁴⁰Culhwch, edited by Bromwich and Evans, pp. lxxxi–lxxxii; cf. Roberts, 'Culhwch ac Olwen, the Triads, Saints' Lives', pp. 73–74.

⁴¹O. J. Padel, 'Some South-Western Sites with Arthurian Associations', in *Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 229–48 (pp. 234–38). ⁴²Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', p. 38. ⁴³Kim McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga*, and *Fianna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 12 (Winter 1986), 1–22; see also Richard Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech* and the Devil's Men', *Ériu*, 30 (1979), 75–92. ⁴⁴Dictionary of the Irish Language (Dublin, 1913–76), s.v. ⁴⁵Marged Haycock, 'Preiddeu Annwn' and the Figure of Taliesin', *SC*, 18/19 (1983–84), 52–78; Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems'. ⁴⁶See n. 37 above. ⁴⁷Sims-Williams, 'Welsh Arthurian Poems', pp. 38–46 (and references). ⁴⁸*Canu Aneirin*, edited by Ifor Williams (Cardiff, 1938), p. 49 (lines 1241–42); cf. *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*, edited and translated by A. O. H. Jarman

parts of which are very possibly of different dates. The line in question appears in only one of the two versions of the text, and this casts doubt upon its being part of the presumed original sixth-century poem. It can reasonably be assumed to date from as early as the tenth century, perhaps the ninth, but no earlier.⁴⁹ The argument has been advanced that only historical personages feature in the *Gododdin* poems, so that Arthur too should be historical, but that ignores two facts: first, that many of the people in the poems appear only there, so that we have no knowledge of whether they are historical or not; secondly, that Arthur appears only *not* to appear, as it were—he is the impossible comparison, used to remind us that there are heights of valour which even Gwawddur could not attain. All in all, the context of this reference, possibly of the ninth or tenth century, arguably suggests that at that date Arthur belonged in a different category from other heroes mentioned in the poems: he was no ordinary warrior.

This concludes the survey of the main pre-Galfridian evidence for the legend of Arthur, with the exception of two pieces. The overall picture is of the leader of a band of heroes who live outside society, whose main world is one of magical animals, giants, and other wonderful happenings, located in the wild parts of the landscape. The general impression is one of apartness. There are hints that Arthur was considered a giant; at any rate his dog had attributes appropriate for a giant's dog, and his nephew's grave was huge. There was a belief that Arthur was not dead; this could have been connected with the idea that he would come again to save the island from its oppressors, but that is not clear in the scanty materials available. The final feature to be noted is that Arthur was a pan-Brittonic hero. Wherever a Brittonic language was or had lately been spoken, the legend of Arthur can be shown to have been current in the pre-Geoffrey period—in southern Scotland, southern Wales, the Welsh borders, south-west England, and Brittany. In most of these areas its main manifestation was his presence in the landscape in the form of place-names and legends.

If we now turn to the two items which, in previous discussions, have always been taken first, as having the closest bearing upon the question 'Was there a historical Arthur?', they can be seen in a different light. Discussion of these two sources is dependent upon Charles-Edwards's perceptive analysis.⁵⁰ The two items, the *Historia*

(Llandysul, 1988), pp. 64–65 (lines 971–72), and note, pp. 149–50; also A. O. H. Jarman, 'The Arthurian Allusions in the Book of Aneirin', *SC*, 24/25 (1989–90), 15–25 (pp. 17–20); and Bromwich, Jarman, and Roberts, 'Introduction', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 1–14 (pp. 3–6). ⁴⁹cf. Charles-Edwards, 'Arthur of History' (n. 2 above), p. 15. ⁵⁰*ibid.*, esp. pp. 25–28.

Brittonum and the *Welsh Annals*, are closely linked with one another, both in their phraseology concerned with Arthur and in their manuscript traditions. The *Annals* mention him in two entries: that for the year 516 recounting the 'battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights, and the Britons were victors' (*Bellum Badonis, in quo Arthur portavit crucem domini nostri Ihesu Christi tribus diebus et tribus noctibus in humeros suos, et Brittones victores fuerunt*), and that for the year 537 about 'the battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell' (*Gueith Camlann in qua Arthur et Medraut corruerunt*).⁵¹ The former entry has close similarities with part of Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* concerning Arthur's battles against the English: that dealing with his eighth battle, *Guinnion* castle, 'in which Arthur carried the image of St Mary ever-virgin upon his shoulders, and the pagans were turned to flight on that day, and there was a great slaughter upon them through the virtue of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Virgin Mary his mother' ('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 Jesu Christi et per virtutem sanctae Mariae virginis genetricis ejus').⁵² However, as Charles-Edwards has pointed out, the similarities are not enough to allow us to posit a direct dependence of one source upon the other; they seem rather like dual elaborations of a single original, written or oral.⁵³ His conclusion is that in neither case is the entry, as it stands, very much older than the text in which it occurs (829–30 for the *Historia Brittonum*, and mid-tenth century for the *Annals*), and that the same applies to the other Arthurian entry in the *Annals*, that concerning Arthur's death at the battle of Camlann.⁵⁴

The list of Arthur's battles in the *Historia Brittonum* has often been discussed, most usefully by Jackson, Jones, and Bromwich.⁵⁵ It is generally agreed that, insofar as they can be identified at all, they cannot all have been the battles of a single commander against the English, since their geographical span (and chronological span, where known) is too great. The identification of place-names in a

⁵¹*Welsh Annals*, in *Nennius*, edited by Morris, p. 85. ⁵²*ibid.*, p. 76. ⁵³Charles-Edwards, 'Arthur of History', pp. 27–28. ⁵⁴For the date of the *Welsh Annals*, see K. Grabowski and D. Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Mediaeval Ireland and Wales* (Woodbridge, 1984), Chapter 4 and references. ⁵⁵Kenneth Jackson, 'Once Again Arthur's Battles', *Modern Philology*, 43 (1945–46), 44–57, and 'Arthur's Battle of Breguoin', *Antiquity*, 23 (1949), 48–49; Jones, 'Early Evolution', pp. 7–11; Rachel Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', *SC*, 10/11 (1975–76), 163–81 (pp. 168–72). Cf. Charles-Edwards, 'Arthur of History', pp. 24 and 28, and n. 47, on another list of battles in the *Historia Brittonum*, Chapters 43–44, those of Gwrthefyr.

text such as this, where there is little or no circumstantial evidence, is so insecure that the list can be used to fit any theory about Arthur's campaigns, but such theories, of which there have been many, are mutually self-cancelling. A more fruitful line of investigation was developed by Thomas Jones, namely that the list was based on a poem in Welsh, and shows the literary accretion to the name of Arthur of the credit for various famous battles from the distant past. The poem was, presumably, current in the early ninth century when the *Historia Brittonum* was compiled.⁵⁶

One of the strongest arguments against a historical Arthur who had a career fighting the English, culminating in the great victory against them at the battle of Mount Badon, has always been that Gildas, the primary historical source for that battle, fails to name him. Arguments have been put forward to account for his silence, none of them convincing. It has been hypothesized that Gildas did not approve of Arthur because they belonged to different political factions (pro-Roman and anti-Roman), despite the fact that Gildas cites the battle in order to approve of it. More plausibly, Jackson suggested that Arthur was not mentioned because his contribution to the victory was too well known: 'what English bishop, . . . about 1860, would be so clumsy as to allude to "the battle of Waterloo, which was won by the Duke of Wellington"?'⁵⁷ However, this ignores the character of Gildas's text at this point, which is precisely to give a brief historical outline to be held up for emulation. (The English bishop could perfectly well have referred to 'the Duke of Wellington's victory at Waterloo' without any clumsiness.) But the whole discussion may be irrelevant, for it can be argued that Gildas does in fact name the British leader at the battle of Mount Badon. The passage runs as follows in the standard editions:

Tempore igitur interveniente aliquanto . . . roborante deo reliquiae, quibus confugiunt undique de diversis locis miserrimi cives, . . . deprecantes . . . ne ad internicionem usque delerentur, duce Ambrosio Aureliano viro modesto, . . . cuius nunc temporibus nostris suboles magnopere avita bonitate degeneravit, vires capessunt, victores provocantes ad proelium: quis victoria domino annuente cessit.

Ex eo tempore nunc cives, nunc hostes, vincebant, . . . usque ad annum obsessionis Badonici montis, novissimaeque ferme de furciferis non minimae stragis. . . .

After a time . . . God gave strength to the survivors [of the Britons].

⁵⁶Jones, 'Early Evolution', pp. 9–10; Jackson, 'Arthur of History', p. 7; cf. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', pp. 169–72. ⁵⁷Jackson, 'Arthur of History', p. 3 (his italics).

Wretched people fled to them from all directions, . . . and begged . . . that they should not be altogether destroyed. Their leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a gentleman. . . . His descendants in our day have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence. Under him our people regained their strength, and challenged the victors to battle. The Lord assented, and the battle went their way.

From then on victory went now to our countrymen, now to their enemies. . . . This lasted right up till the year of the siege of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least.⁵⁸

This is followed immediately by the well-known passage about chronology, which has given rise to much discussion.⁵⁹

The division into paragraphs, as above, is that found in all modern editions. However, the only early witness to the full text (and to this chapter) of the *De Excidio* is the tenth-century manuscript in the British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.vi; all other complete copies date from the later twelfth century or later.⁶⁰ Examination of this manuscript, badly damaged in the Cottonian fire of 1731, shows that the paragraph-division has no basis in the original. The *e* of *ex* with which the second paragraph begins has nothing to make it stand out as a break, and is comparable in size and shape with numerous other word-initial *es*, not necessarily at the beginnings of sentences;⁶¹ in contrast, there are large initial *Es* elsewhere in the text.⁶² The manuscript thus provides no authority for any paragraph-break at this point. If the paragraph-break is removed, and the whole passage taken as one, then Mount Badon reads naturally as the victory which crowned the career of Ambrosius Aurelianus himself.⁶³

⁵⁸Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, edited by Michael Winterbottom (Chichester, 1978), pp. 98 and 28 (§§ 25–26); Winterbottom's translation. The phrases omitted consist mainly of Gildasian rhetoric. ⁵⁹Ian Wood, 'The End of Roman Britain: Continental Evidence and Parallels', in *Gildas: New Approaches*, edited by Michael Lapidge and David Dumville (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 1–25 (pp. 22–23); David N. Dumville, 'The Chronology of *De Excidio Britanniae*, Book I', *ibid.*, pp. 61–84 (especially pp. 75–78), and references; see also the review by Thomas Charles-Edwards, *CMCS*, 12 (Winter 1986), 115–20 (pp. 118–19). ⁶⁰David N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend', *History*, new series, 62 (1977), 173–92 (pp. 183–84). ⁶¹Close to the letter in question, compare the initial *es* in *et miserabili*, fol. 8^v (= Winterbottom, §24.3), *et nulla*, fol. 8^r (§24.4), *et densissimis*, fol. 8^v (§25.1), and *experta*, fol. 9^v (§26.3); and elsewhere note those of *ex agno*, fol. 13^v (§34.3), *et si mortui erit*, fol. 14^v–17–18 (§35.5), and *exaudita*, fol. 14^v–20 (§35.5). ⁶²Contrast the initial letters of *Et iterum* and *et custodiant*, fol. 15^v–16–17 (Winterbottom, §36.2), and also of *En primus* and *ex cuius*, fol. 16^v and 7 (Winterbottom, §38.1). In each pair the first is markedly large and differently shaped, while the second is like that in *ex (eo tempore)*. ⁶³Compare the view of Dumville, 'Chronology', pp. 76–77, that the interval implied in 'Ex eo tempore' was brief. Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 28, has raised and dismissed the interpretation offered here.

This interpretation does not seem to entail any chronological or historical implications which would argue against it. The grandchildren of Ambrosius were apparently adult (or at least old enough for their degeneracy to be apparent) by the time Gildas was writing, probably 44 years after Badon. Indeed, Dumville has already allowed the possibility of the suggestion made here: 'If we suppose that Ambrosius had ceased to lead (or rule) before Mount Badon—although that is an inference from Gildas's silence, and not a mandatory conclusion . . .'.⁶⁴ The present argument is that Gildas's silence points the other way, and that such a conclusion is far from mandatory—rather, indeed, that a natural reading of the passage, ignoring the modern paragraph-division, is that Ambrosius was still leading the British at the battle of Mount Badon.

If so, then the later attribution of the battle to Arthur is an instance of that figure having, by the ninth century, attracted the names of battles which originally involved other leaders. The two sources which make the attribution, the *Welsh Annals* and the list of Arthur's battles in the *Historia Brittonum*, do not, of course, have independent authority for it. There are other possible instances of such a process of attraction in the list of his battles. The eleventh is called 'the mount called *Agned*' in some versions of the text, and *Breguoin* (with variant spellings) in others; the latter name is to be equated with *kat gellawr brewyn*, 'the battle of the cells (or huts) of Brewyn', a victory of Urien of Rheged according to one of the poems attributed to Taliesin.⁶⁵ It has been suggested that the ninth battle, *in urbe Legionis*, may refer to the battle of Chester in 613, for which Bede uses names including *civitas Legionum* and *Carlegion*, and the *Welsh Annals* use *Cair Legion* (though, if so, it is curious that such a major slaughter of the Welsh should have come to be attributed to Arthur, presumably as a victory).⁶⁶ Another such battle might be the seventh, 'in silva Celidonis, id est Cat Coit Celidon' ('in the wood of Caledonia, that is the Battle of the Wood of Caledonia'), if that could refer to the battle of Arfderydd, renowned in Welsh literature as the battle where Merlin went mad and ran off to live in Coed Celyddon, the Caledonian forest.⁶⁷ But most of the battles in

⁶⁴'Chronology', p. 77. ⁶⁵*The Poems of Taliesin*, edited by Sir Ifor Williams, English version by J. E. Caerwyn Williams (Dublin, 1968), vii.22 (note, p. 86); Jackson, 'Arthur's Battle of Breguoin'. ⁶⁶Jackson, 'Once Again Arthur's Battles', p. 50; Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ii.2; *Welsh Annals* (in *Nennius*, edited by Morris), s.a. 613; cf. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', p. 171. ⁶⁷A. O. H. Jarman, *The Legend of Merlin* (Cardiff, 1960), esp. pp. 15–16; idem, 'The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy', in *Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 117–45 (p. 118); one early poetic reference to *coed keltion* fairly certainly refers to the battle of Arfderydd: *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin*, edited by A. O. H. Jarman (Cardiff, 1967), pp. 16 and 58 (line 36).

the list are unrecorded elsewhere, so there is no means of knowing for how long they had been attributed to Arthur. Thus there were already grounds for doubting the attribution of the battle of Badon to him, even before the present interpretation was offered.⁶⁸ The attribution, if incorrect, would be paralleled by at least one or two of these 'attracted' battles, and the near-contemporary testimony of Gildas, who arguably ascribes the victory to Ambrosius instead, is much to be preferred.

Whether this interpretation of Mount Badon is accepted or not, the clear indication from the very diverse pieces of evidence which have been examined is that the two 'historical' references to Arthur are the exception among the pre-Galfridian allusions to him; those belonging in the realm of legend are in the great majority. This enables us to approach once more the contrast presented at the beginning of the article, where we saw the figure of Arthur already appearing in a dual state at its earliest manifestation, in the *Historia Brittonum*. Which came first? As noted, commentators have tended to assume that the historical Arthur was the primary one, and that the local legends appearing in the same text were the accretion. The weight of the collective evidence examined here is that the reality was the other way round—that it was the legendary Arthur who was the primary one, and that by the time of the *Historia Brittonum* in 829–30 he had started to attract pseudo-historical material to his name. But the local legends continued, largely unaffected by this literary development, and they appear right across the Brittonic-speaking world as soon as there are written documents of a kind capable of manifesting them. With the exception of the *Historia Brittonum*, and possibly some of the Welsh poetic references, this is not until the twelfth century; but the instances which we have examined are mostly dated earlier than Geoffrey's *History*, and cannot be derived from it. The legends, being local ones, often attached to nothing more significant than a rock or minor archaeological feature, were by their nature liable to escape written records, and the surprising thing is that, collected together, there are so many of them from so early a date.

As thus described, the Arthurian legend has a very close parallel in the Irish literary tradition. The similarities between the legends of Arthur and Fionn have often been pointed out, notably by Van Hamel in 1934, and more recently by Ó hÓgáin.⁶⁹ Van Hamel

⁶⁸See further T. Jones, review of Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, in *SC*, 7 (1972), 184–86, and Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', pp. 168 and 172. ⁶⁹A. G. Van Hamel, 'Aspects of Celtic Mythology', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 20 (1934), 207–48; see also Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, p. 206; Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn*, iii, Irish Texts Society, 43 (London, 1953), pp. 213–17; and Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn mac*

took his comparison of the two figures a stage further, and concluded that Arthur, like Fionn, was originally a pagan god.⁷⁰ However, in dismissing that final claim as unnecessary, there is no need to dismiss the parallel itself, as has often been done. The parallel consists in the types of tales told about the heroes, and the way in which these groups of tales were used in the rural societies which predominated in Celtic-speaking areas in the pre-Norman period.⁷¹

The similarities are as follows. Like Arthur's, Fionn's world is primarily a legendary one of giants and magical animals. Like Arthur too, he appears constantly in legends connected with features in the landscape, particularly natural rocks and prehistoric antiquities: Ó hÓgáin has aptly termed it 'the repeated tendency to connect our hero with topography'.⁷² These legends of Fionn occur localized wherever a Goidelic language was spoken, from the south of Ireland to northern Scotland, just as those of Arthur are found localized wherever a Brittonic language was spoken, from Cornwall (and perhaps Brittany) to southern Scotland. Fionn and his band of warriors are portrayed as living outside society, in the wilderness which bears so many visible marks of their activities.⁷³ With the greater wealth of detail provided by Irish literature, the circumstances are clearly specified. Fionn's warriors, once they had joined his war-band, were no longer bound by the rules which governed normal civilized existence in early Ireland. In particular, each man's kin-group, from which he was now separated, could not exact vengeance or recompense if he died in Fionn's service; correspondingly, the kin could not be held responsible for any act performed by the warrior (as they could have been, under other circumstances, in early Irish law). Although specific to Ireland in this form, this serves to amplify the 'irresponsible atmosphere' which we have already seen also to be characteristic of the Welsh Arthurian literature.

Fionn also had a particular role as the defender of the island of Ireland, particularly against the people who came to be enshrined in folklore as the most threatening invaders remembered in Irish history: the Scandinavians. This idea appears in the surviving literature

Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero (Dublin, 1988), p. 126; *contra*, Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', p. 166. ⁷⁰For Fionn's origins as a pagan deity see Murphy, *Duanire Finn*, III, lxx–lxxxv, and Ó hÓgáin, Chapter 1. ⁷¹A different Welsh parallel for the Fionn cycle, namely the poetry ascribed to Llywarch Hen, has been suggested by N. J. A. Williams, 'Canu Llywarch Hen and the Finn Cycle', in *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd / Studies in Old Welsh Poetry*, cyflwynedig i Syr Idris Foster, edited by Rachel Bromwich and R. Brinley Jones (Cardiff, 1978), pp. 234–65. The two comparisons are not incompatible, and the similarities lie in different areas, that of Canu Llywarch lying primarily in the type of poetry associated with the central characters. ⁷²Ó hÓgáin, p. 117. ⁷³*Ibid.*, pp. 75, 86, 104, and *passim*.

first in the eleventh century and it was to become a dominant feature of tales about Fionn in later times.⁷⁴ It illuminates the idea that Arthur acted as a defender of the island of Britain, particularly against its direst enemies, the English.

The parallels go much further. They extend to minor details, which could be coincidental, and, more importantly, to the ways in which the cycles of tradition (both oral and written) developed over the centuries. The minor details include Fionn's reputation as a womanizer, which parallels Arthur's impulse, in the *Life of St Cadog*, to abduct the princess in distress, until his companions reminded him of his duties.⁷⁵ Fionn often shows great magnanimity in the tales, but is also capable of great pettiness:⁷⁶ similarly Arthur displays great generosity (for instance, in helping his cousin Culhwch to win Olwen, though it can be argued that this was done under moral pressure), but can be petty in his bargaining in the saints' Lives. We have names for Fionn's weapons, and learn of their characteristics; these parallel the names for Arthur's weapons in early Welsh literature.⁷⁷ The two early examples of 'Arthur's oven', one in Devon and the other (thirteenth-century) in Scotland, are paralleled by Irish *fulachta*, ancient cooking-places in wild areas, often attributed to Fionn and his men—a natural development from the hunting life ascribed to the bands of heroes.⁷⁸ As in the case of Arthur, Irish literature provides lists of Fionn's warriors (paralleling those in *Culhwch* and 'What Man is Porter?') and of his battles, the earliest of the latter dating from the eleventh century. Ó hÓgáin suggests that most of the battles may have been invented spontaneously for the purposes of that list—an instructive parallel for those attempting to identify Arthur's battles.⁷⁹ These parallels show that such lists are not attached only to historical figures, for nobody today would argue that Fionn was originally a real person. In addition there are stories that Fionn and his warriors are not dead, but only sleeping. These are recorded only from nineteenth-century Scotland, but the frame of the twelfth-century Fenian text *Acallam na Senórach* ('The Colloquy of the Ancients') is that Fionn's two companions, Oisín and Caoilte, returned in St Patrick's time (the fifth century) and told him tales of their former adventures, set in the Irish landscape. It seems

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 144–46 and 212–22; Reidar Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition* (Oslo, 1931); Proinsias Mac Cana, 'The Influence of the Vikings on Celtic Literature', in *The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-Speaking Peoples c. 800–1100 A.D.* [Proceedings of the First International Congress of Celtic Studies], edited by Brian Ó Cuív (Dublin, 1962), pp. 78–118, esp. pp. 86–99. ⁷⁵Ó hÓgáin, pp. 46 and 107–8; above, p. 7. ⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p. 121. ⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 121; Patrick K. Ford, 'On the Significance of Some Arthurian Names in Welsh', *BBCS*, 30 (1982–83), 268–73. ⁷⁸Ó hÓgáin, pp. 75–76 and references, p. 330, n. 77. ⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 122 (Fionn's warriors) and 143 (Fionn's battles).

very possible that the framework of this literary compilation was inspired by a popular idea that Fionn and his warriors would return someday. If so, then the *Acallam* provides evidence that such a belief was current in the twelfth century.⁸⁰

The parallels in the development of the two legends are more important than these incidental details, many of which follow naturally from the basic similarities in form and setting. For present purposes, the most important point is the way in which the legend of Fionn seems to have originated as disparate pieces of local folklore, usually narrating a single episode in the hero's life and adventures in the wilderness, and often with a feature of the landscape and a place-name as the focus; but from the tenth century onwards, as a literary rather than an oral development, these tales became formalized, partly by selecting data from what was probably a flourishing oral tradition, and a coherent account of Fionn's life and death was gradually constructed.⁸¹ This then developed further, acquiring an aura of romance and of Christian virtues, though Fionn had previously been a seer, adventurer, and warrior, heroic rather than romantic. It occurred in parallel with similar developments in the Arthurian legend in Britain and on the Continent, thus facilitating the interchange of ideas or names between the legends of Fionn and Arthur.⁸² The basic similarities, however, had long been there. What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that, with a rounded account of the hero's life and deeds, an account of his end also became necessary. There were varying accounts of his death, with two basic versions—either in battle (sometimes through treachery), or by Fionn's attempting in old age the leaping feats of his youth (the latter tales being localized in the landscape, of course, and with accompanying place-names).⁸³ What is particularly interesting for students of the Arthurian legend is that a version of the former type, death through beheading by his enemies, was entered in an Irish chronicle under the year 283; the entry has been attributed to the eleventh century.⁸⁴

There were thus two ways in which the legendary Fionn was historicized in Irish literary tradition. One was by entering his death in the *Annals*, locating it towards the end of the third century. The

⁸⁰The belief in the survival of the heroes until St Patrick's time was older than the *Acallam*, according to Ó hÓgáin, p. 243; however, he also argues (p. 309) that the nineteenth-century tales of the 'sleeping heroes' were borrowed from Arthurian tales in Scotland. ⁸¹*Ibid.*, pp. 81, 90, and 95. ⁸²*Ibid.*, pp. 119–20 and 126. ⁸³*Ibid.*, pp. 108–12. ⁸⁴'The Annals of Tigernach: Second Fragment, A.D. 143–A.D. 361', edited by Whitley Stokes, *Revue celtique*, 17 (1896), 6–33 (p. 21); for the date of the entry, see Kuno Meyer, *Fianaigecht* (Dublin, 1910), p. xxvi; Ó hÓgáin, pp. 112–13. The date 283 may not be exact: the rough calculation makes it A.D. 274 instead, but 283 is the date usually cited (e.g. by Meyer and Ó hÓgáin).

other was by making him fight Ireland's most threatening invaders, the Vikings. This would of course have located him in the ninth, tenth, or eleventh century, but the discrepancy does not seem to have worried Irish men of literature. The Vikings had become so universal as the archetypal foes of Ireland that they may not have been considered to belong to a particular period, at least for the purposes of storytelling. The process of historicizing legends was a widespread feature of Celtic literary activity in the Middle Ages, especially in Ireland: heroes of the quite separate Ulster Cycle of Irish literature also appear in the Irish *Annals*.⁸⁵ In that country the process was closely allied to another: the creation of a full national pseudo-history, taking the history of Ireland back to biblical times, and linking it with that of the ancient world, culminating in the great eleventh-century compilation, the *Lebor Gabála* or 'Book of Settlement' of Ireland. In a very useful discussion, Carey has recently drawn a parallel between that text and the earlier *Historia Brittonum*: the Irish did not have a monopoly of the process.⁸⁶ This greatly expands our understanding of the *Historia Brittonum*, providing a context for the earliest records of Arthur.

The two 'historical' facts about Arthur, that he was a British battle-leader against the English, and his death at the battle of Camlann recorded in the *Welsh Annals*, now appear in a different light. Like so much else about Arthur, both are paralleled in the Irish material about Fionn. The great difference is that the Welsh historicizing was more consistent, for Arthur's death in the *Annals* was entered at a date, 537, entirely compatible with his having fought against the English, whereas the two attributes of the Irish hero are six to eight centuries apart. This greater consistency on the part of the Welsh scholars does not mean that the historicizing of Arthur necessarily carries greater weight than that of Fionn, but it has meant that the process has succeeded in convincing people down to the present day. The result has been a dual strand in the Arthurian legend, from its first appearance in the ninth century until the present. One has been the apparently historical Arthur, that of *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 56, who was taken up by Geoffrey of Monmouth and embellished. The other strand is that of Chapter 73, the legendary Arthur of folklore and local tales. He too has survived to modern times, but, as seen above, he has always been regarded as the accretion. The above explanation of the historical references to

⁸⁵For some instances, see David N. Dumville, 'Ulster Heroes in the Early Irish Annals: A Caveat', *Éigse*, 17 (1977–79), 47–54. ⁸⁶John Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory*, Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Mediaeval Gaelic History, 1 (Cambridge, 1994), esp. pp. 5–13; cf. Dumville, 'Historical Value' (n. 5 above), pp. 5–7, and Charles-Edwards, 'Arthur of History'.

Arthur supports the conclusion already obtained, that the weight of pre-Galfridian evidence indicates that the legendary Arthur is the original one, and that the historical aspects are the accretion.

This conclusion provides a context for a curious fact which has been observed: the sudden occurrence of four people called *Artur* in western Britain in the late sixth or early seventh centuries, all in the context of the Irish settlers in western Wales and Scotland at that period,⁸⁷ alongside, apparently, a complete absence of British people bearing the name. If Arthur was primarily a figure of folklore, regarded as superhuman and with exceptional awe, then the lack of examples of the use of his name in Britain is explicable (though that was not the case in Brittany, or at least not in the ninth and tenth centuries).⁸⁸ The Irish, however, when they came into contact with the folklore as a result of their settlements in western Britain, need not have felt such reverence or reluctance.

One important question remains to be asked about this conclusion, and several consequences follow from it. First, was the historicizing of Arthur older than the *Historia Brittonum* and, if so, what form might it previously have taken?⁸⁹ The question cannot be answered with assurance, owing to lack of information about earlier historical (or pseudo-historical) activity in Wales, but a possible answer can be suggested, again with the help of the fuller Irish material about Fionn. As mentioned above, some story about Fionn's death existed already in the ninth century; what might be considered the learned version of his death (death in battle) is recorded in the tenth, and the earliest reference to an alternative, folklore, version of his death (in attempting a leap of his youth) seems to date from the same century.⁹⁰ The entry of his death in the *Annals of Tigernach* (again the learned version) and the earliest indication that he was seen as the defender of Ireland against the Vikings are both said to date from the eleventh century. Similarly in the case of Arthur, the historicizing would probably have been a gradual process, and it will be a matter of opinion which part of it is likely to have come first, whether the battles attributed to him or a story about his death. If the historicizing began in the oral tradition, then it may be that the idea of Arthur as defender of Britain against the English was the first element to appear, but the recording of his death in the *Annals* is a literary development, and it was in that medium that the historicizing took root and flourished. However, the recent analysis by Charles-Edwards suggests that the author of the *Historia Brittonum*

⁸⁷Best discussion by Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', pp. 177–79. ⁸⁸J. Loth, *Chrestomathie bretonne* (Paris, 1890), p. 107. ⁸⁹I am grateful to Thomas Charles-Edwards for raising this question in conversation. ⁹⁰Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, p. xxv (no. XXVII).

had reason to locate Arthur in the sixth century, so it may be that by his time the historicizing (written or oral) had taken the form of connecting him with particular individuals, either British or English, who were located in that century and were associated with the defence of Britain against the English.

One of the consequences of this view of the Arthurian legend is that post-Galfridian folklore in Britain appears in a new light. The frequency of references to Arthur in later folklore is usually dismissed or ignored, presumably on the assumption that it is likely to be due to, or contaminated by, the literary developments of the legend. Two such references have already been mentioned, both from the thirteenth century: the name 'Arthur's Stone' attached to a prehistoric monument near the presumed site of *Licat Amr* in Herefordshire, and the name 'Arthur's oven' found in Stirlingshire, probably replacing the earlier 'Arthur's palace', and paralleling the earlier 'Arthur's oven' in Devon. We have already seen that it is in the nature of these pieces of local folklore not to appear in the written record until the documentation becomes fuller (and only very rarely do we have the story that must have accompanied the name—usually there is only the place-name itself). The corollary is that the names could often have been quite old at the date of their earliest records. It is worth examining briefly a few of these, out of many possible ones. What is to be emphasized here is the similarity of these later references to those which have already been examined because of their pre-Galfridian credentials: the two thirteenth-century instances just cited, and the additional ones given below, show that there is often very little difference between those found before Geoffrey's time and those found later.

One such name is *Burum Arturi*, 'Arthur's bower' (i.e. 'bed-chamber', rather than 'cottage?'), located in Carlisle, and first recorded in the 1170s.⁹¹ This recalls the items of Arthur's furniture attested elsewhere—not only his seat and his oven, noted above, but also his table (for instance the hill-fort known as *Bwrdd Arthur* in Anglesey, Grid Reference SH 5881) and his bed (see below). It is worth stressing again the close parallel with lore about Fionn in Ireland, at all periods.⁹² Another similar name is a further example of 'Arthur's seat', this time in Wales, and recorded c. 1190: a hill 'Kaerarthur dictus, id est cathedra Arthuri, propter gemina promontorii cacumina in cathedrae modum se praeferebat' ('called Kair-arthur [*sic*, for *Kadeirarthur* presumably], that is Arthur's seat,

⁹¹A. M. Armstrong and others, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 20–22 (Cambridge, 1950–52), I, 50. ⁹²*Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne: The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, edited by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, Irish Texts Society, 48 (Dublin, 1967), pp. xx–xxi; Ó hÓgáin, pp. 307–8.

because of the twin peaks of a projection rising up in the form of a chair').⁹³ The mountain so named is taken to be that now called Pen y Fan, the highest point of the Brecon Beacons. This again parallels the example in Devon from earlier in the same century. Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh is another famous instance of the same name; the earliest record of this known to me is *Arthurissete* in 1508, but the parallel with the two twelfth-century examples raises the possibility that the name is rather older.⁹⁴ It is hard to see how these local names in Carlisle and Breconshire would have been due to Geoffrey's *History*: as noted above, its initial influence will have been literary rather than among the local people who would have bestowed such names, and there is nothing in Geoffrey's work to give rise to such homely local touches, whereas the names are paralleled by the pre-Galfridian folklore already discussed. The inference to be drawn is that these names, though attested only after Geoffrey's *History* had appeared, belong in the pre-Galfridian tradition and are not due to his work.

Further examples of such place-names are given by Grooms in his discussion of Welsh folklore about giants: among other names, various examples of Arthur's Chair and one of *Eisteddfa Arthur* ('Arthur's seat') are cited, mostly recorded only in the modern period.⁹⁵ They are rightly interpreted as reflecting the common theme in folklore that Arthur was a giant. We have already noted that there are hints of this belief in the medieval material, and a similar motif is often found in folklore attached to Fionn and his men, as early as the twelfth-century *Acallam*.⁹⁶

One of the commonest Arthurian place-names cited by Grooms is *Coeten Arthur*, 'Arthur's quoit' (*quoit* meaning 'discus, a solid circular object thrown for sport'). This is a name usually applied to a cromlech (prehistoric stone burial-chamber). Originally the name must have referred only to the capstone of such a structure, but it evidently came to be transferred to the whole. Similar names also occur in Cornwall, in the form Arthur's Quoit or Giant's Quoit; one such cromlech (now destroyed) is referred to by both names in the nineteenth century.⁹⁷ The implication is again an attribution of giant-

⁹³Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Kambrie*, 1.2, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, edited by J. S. Brewer and others, 8 vols, Rolls Series (London, 1860–90), vi, 36; Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and the Description of Wales*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 96. ⁹⁴James B. Johnston, *Place-Names of Scotland*, third edition (London, 1934), p. 89. ⁹⁵Chris Grooms, *The Giants of Wales: Cewri Cymru* (Lampeter, 1993), pp. 113–28, esp. pp. 114–15 and 127. ⁹⁶Ó hÓgáin, pp. 303–5. ⁹⁷Now called Giant's Quoit, in the parish of St Columb Major, SW 923619; for discussion of the names and illustrations, see Nicholas Johnson, 'The

like strength to Arthur, who would fling these vast stones around in sport. A further context for such names is provided by a fifteenth-century Irish text about Fionn, in which the hero performed a prodigious leap over a particular rock in order to please a beautiful maiden, who then demanded that he should repeat the jump holding a stone of his own size. A story such as this could have given rise to the thirteenth-century 'Arthur's Stone' in Herefordshire already discussed.⁹⁸ In Brittany a cromlech near Trébeurden (Côtes-du-Nord) is locally said to be Arthur's grave.⁹⁹ The Cornish place-names have given rise to a local archaeological term in Cornwall and Devon, *quoit*, meaning a cromlech or stone burial-chamber. These names incorporating 'quoit', Welsh and Anglo-Cornish, are particularly useful for the fact that the word used is an English one (Welsh *coeten* is borrowed from English; the English term is of obscure origin, but is first recorded in an Anglo-French text of 1388).¹⁰⁰ As a consequence, they must be fairly late names, unlikely to date from earlier than the fourteenth or fifteenth century. This means, in turn, that the similarity of names in Wales and Cornwall must be due to parallel development, and not to the names' dating back to the period of common culture and language. What interests us, and is so impressive, is not the antiquity of any individual name, but the vitality and the consistency of the tradition in the various Brittonic-speaking areas.

Three later Arthurian sites, all in Cornwall, remain to be considered, for the further demonstration which they provide of this consistency. The first is the well-known one of Tintagel. Within the castle on the headland there is a chapel, beside which there is a single rock-cut grave. The point of interest here is a remark by an antiquary, John Norden, writing c. 1600. He does not claim any Arthurian associations for the grave, though of course he knew the legend associated with the castle itself:

Ther is in this Castle a hole hewed out of a rocke, made in manner of a graue, which is sayde to haue bene done by an Herimite for his buriall; and the graue will fitt euerye stature, as is effabuled; but experience doth not so assure me.¹⁰¹

Devil's Coyt, St Columb Major, and the Discovery of Two New Megalithic Tombs', *Cornish Archaeology*, 18 (1979), 3–11. ⁹⁸Ó hÓgáin, p. 116; and see n. 13 above. ⁹⁹W. Branch Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany* (London, 1927), p. 119. ¹⁰⁰*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*, edited by R. J. Thomas and others (Cardiff, 1950–), s.v. *coetan*, first recorded in the sixteenth century; *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, edited by C. T. Onions (Oxford, 1966), s.v. *quoit*. ¹⁰¹John Norden, *Speculi Brianniae Pars: A Topographical and Historical Description of Cornwall* (London, 1728), pp. 81–82.

Variable-length graves are recorded occasionally elsewhere in Celtic folklore, in addition to *Licat Amr* in the *Historia Brittonum*.¹⁰² What is significant here is finding one in an Arthurian context, and Norden's remark of having tried its length, echoing so closely (though with a different result) the remark in the *Historia Brittonum* almost eight hundred years earlier, in relation to *Licat Amr*: 'et ego solus probavi' ('and I myself have tried it'). Not only the folklore, it seems, but the scepticism of visitors has been remarkably constant over the centuries.

The second Cornish site is a stone near the Giant's Quoit mentioned earlier. In about 1740 it is described in the following terms:

Not far from this Coyt, at the edge of the Goss-moor, there is a large stone, wherein is deeply imprinted a mark, as if it were the impress of four horseshoes, and to this day called King Arthur's Stone; yea, tradition tells us they were made by King Arthur's horse's feet, when he resided at Castle Denis, and hunted in the Goss-Moor. But this stone is now overturned by some seekers for money.¹⁰³

The motif of a rock showing a person's or animal's footprint appears elsewhere in Celtic folklore: in Wales, both St Cynllo's horse and St Elian's oxen are said to have left such marks.¹⁰⁴ Yet the particular similarity of this reference to the *Carn Cabal* of the *Historia Brittonum* will not need to be stressed, extending as it does to the prints having been made while Arthur was hunting. The possibility of an antiquarian borrowing seems negligible, because of the dissimilarities (Arthur's horse instead of his dog, no mention of what he was hunting, and the lack of any name for the horse or the stone). Again, there is no reason to suppose that the Cornish item is particularly ancient: that is not the point of interest. But there could hardly be a clearer demonstration of the consistency of Arthurian folklore over nine hundred years. The wild upland of Goss Moor, in mid-Cornwall, is an area of considerable Arthurian interest. In about 1139 Geoffrey of Monmouth had set part of his Cornish episode of Arthur's conception here; William of Worcester, in 1478, seems to have heard a garbled local version of that story (doubtless with some literary influence);¹⁰⁵ and as late as 1867 a passing antiquary was told of an old man who had seen the ghosts of King Arthur's soldiers there

¹⁰²In Wales, Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Kambrie*, II.3; in Ireland, the Dwarf's Grave at Tara, 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas', edited by Whitley Stokes [part I], *RC*, 15 (1894), 272–336 (pp. 282 and 286). ¹⁰³William Hals, in [Joseph Polsue], *A Complete Parochial History of the County of Cornwall*, 4 vols (Truro, 1867–72), I, 227. ¹⁰⁴S. Baring-Gould and J. Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints*, 4 vols (London, 1907–13), II, 263 and 436. ¹⁰⁵O. J. Padel, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and Cornwall', *CMCS*, 8 (Winter 1984), 1–28 (p. 12).

one night, and remembered 'the glancing of the moonbeams on their muskets'!¹⁰⁶

The final Cornish site to be discussed (there are others) is that called King Arthur's Bed, on Bodmin Moor in east Cornwall (Grid Reference SX 240756). It is a rock on top of a hill, with a natural hollow shaped like a human torso. The first record of the site, to my knowledge, is by the Cornish antiquary Dr William Borlase in 1754. His accompanying remarks are instructive:

Round Arthur's Bed, on a rocky Tor in the parish of North-hill, there are many [rock basins], which the country people call Arthur's Troughs, in which he us'd to feed his Dogs. Near by also, is Arthur's Hall, and whatever is great, and the use and Author unknown, is attributed to Arthur.¹⁰⁷

This instance is of value, both because it introduces yet another item of furniture to add to the seats, ovens, and table already mentioned (and paralleling the stone beds of Fenian lore in Ireland), and because of the lateness of its first appearance. Once again it is situated in a wild upland area, Arthur's home ground; the close parallel is with Arthur's chair, observed not far away by the canons of Laon in 1113, but its general similarity, in type and setting, to other pieces of Arthurian folklore, combined with its late appearance, extends the date-range of the first attestations of such Arthurian lore to almost a thousand years, from 829–30 to 1754. (Some of the Welsh names listed by Grooms, first recorded only in the nineteenth century, extend this range yet further, to more than a millennium.) The consistency is again remarkable: an Arthur who is feeding his dogs in such a moorland is Arthur the hunter, as at the previous site on Goss Moor but also in the *Historia Brittonum*, and as in so many Irish references to Fionn. Borlase's final comment precisely sums up the role that Arthur has played in local folklore for all this time. The folklore may in some cases have been boosted by the literary developments during the same period (it is particularly surprising to find the folklore flourishing in east Cornwall, where the Cornish language had been dead for a good half-millennium in Borlase's day), but, as this quotation and the previous one show, it

¹⁰⁶Henry Jenner, 'Some Possible Arthurian Place-Names in West Penwith', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, 19 (1912–14), 46–89 (p. 59 n.). ¹⁰⁷William Borlase, *Observations on the Antiquities Historical and Monumental of the County of Cornwall*, first edition (Oxford, 1754), p. 226; cf. plate XVII, no. vi. King Arthur's Hall, an unexplained archaeological monument seven miles away in St Breward parish, Grid Reference SX 129776, is first recorded c. 1600: Padel, 'Sites with Arthurian Associations' (n. 41 above), p. 235 and n. 24.

remained largely unaffected by the literary Arthurian cycle, and retained its character throughout the period. This is a further reason for regarding the folklore Arthur of the *Historia Brittonum* as the true one, and the 'historical' Arthur as the secondary development.

In addition to showing post-Galfridian folklore in a new light, this conclusion about the essential nature of the Arthurian legend also makes discussion of the original location of Arthur largely irrelevant. It is clear that, as far back as the required kind of written documentation can take us, Arthur is a pan-Brittonic hero. He is honoured in local folklore wherever a Brittonic language has been spoken, and this folklore is attested in all areas as soon as there are records capable of showing it. This means that theories about Arthur, attempting to locate him in one region or another by means of identifying the sites of his battles or by other reasoning, are irrelevant, because evidence is available to fit any theory. His pan-Brittonic nature was already recognized in Wales by the thirteenth century, for the Welsh *Triads* gave him three courts, in Wales, Cornwall, and Scotland.¹⁰⁸

Finally, these conclusions about the nature of the Arthurian legend provide a refutation of the 'no smoke without fire' argument for a historical Arthur.¹⁰⁹ If Arthur, in local folklore in the Brittonic-speaking lands, occupied a role very similar to that of Fionn in the Gaelic-speaking countries, then we have a fully adequate explanation for the widespread currency of his name as a hero. It is not considered necessary to hypothesize a historical figure behind the cycle of folklore and literature centred on Fionn, and there is no more need to postulate one behind the similar cycle centred on Arthur. The legendary figure was historicized, at least as early as the *Historia Brittonum* in 829–30, and perhaps before that, and it was this historicized figure which was developed by Geoffrey of Monmouth and provided the beginnings of the fully-grown Arthurian cycle later in the twelfth century.

One argument occasionally used in defence of a historical Arthur is that the motif of the 'sleeping hero' who will return is generally attached to historical personages—Charlemagne is one, Frederick Barbarossa another, and there are others in later medieval Irish and Welsh history and further afield.¹¹⁰ Now that the other evidence for a historical Arthur has vanished, this is his sole remaining prop. It

¹⁰⁸*Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, edited by Rachel Bromwich, second edition (Cardiff, 1978), pp. 1–4 and 211. ¹⁰⁹Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain' (n. 54 above), p. 187. ¹¹⁰Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*, pp. 221–27 (good examples and discussion); Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, revised edition, 6 vols (Bloomington, 1955–58), nos A.571 'Culture hero asleep in mountain', A.580 'Culture hero's expected return', and D.1960.2 'King asleep in mountain'.

will be appreciated that the historical Arthur is by now on very shaky ground, if this is the strongest argument in his favour. As we have seen, the motif was later attached to Fionn, so it is not exclusively attached to historical personages. This holds true even if it had been transferred to Fionn from Arthur, for, if so, it could equally well have been transferred originally to a non-historical Arthur from some other figure.

If it is still deemed necessary to posit a historical Arthur on the basis of this slender evidence, despite the arguments given above, this can now be done without the strait-jacket of the fifth and sixth centuries imposed by the spurious historical references discussed above. In that case, the best candidate for such a prototype would be Lucius Artorius Castus, a Roman centurion of the late second or the third century who was appointed to lead two legions from Britain against the Armoricans; our knowledge of him comes from a memorial to him erected in his native Dalmatia.¹¹¹ He was first suggested as the origin of Arthur in 1925, and the suggestion has received occasional endorsement from classical scholars.¹¹² The only attribute which he shares with the figure of Arthur is his campaign on the Continent, and he shares this not with the pre-Galfridian Arthur, but with Geoffrey's pseudo-historical figure. However, he is at least a war-leader of eminence and has the right name.¹¹³ But the whole burden of the present article is to demonstrate why it is unnecessary to postulate a historical person behind the legend of Arthur as seen in our earliest sources. The cumulative weight of the early evidence indicates that he was primarily a pan-Brittonic figure of local wonder-tales. These tales remained remarkably consistent over a period of more than a thousand years, and the closely parallel Gaelic folklore about Fionn demonstrates how historical attributes of just the kind that we find attached to Arthur can be associated with a figure who was not historical to start with.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹E. Groag and A. Stein, *Prosopographia Imperii Romani, Saec. I. II. III.* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1933–), 1, 237 (no. 1184); H.-G. Pflaum, *Les Carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le Haut-Empire romain*, 3 vols (Paris, 1960–61), no. 196. My thanks to Dr Mark Hassall for first drawing this figure to my attention. ¹¹²Kemp Malone, 'Artorius', *Modern Philology*, 22 (1924–25), 367–74; Anthony Birley, *The People of Roman Britain* (London, 1979), p. 45. ¹¹³He is thus a much better candidate than Riotamus, a fifth-century leader of Britons on the Continent who has recently been suggested as a prototype: Geoffrey Ashe, 'A certain very ancient book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 301–23; cf. Jeremy duQuesnay Adams, 'Sidonius and Rithamus: A Glimpse of the Historical Arthur?', *Arthurian Literature*, 12 (1993), 157–64. Riotamus, like Artorius Castus, has nothing in common with the pre-Galfridian Arthur, and in addition has the wrong name. ¹¹⁴I warmly thank Drs Thomas Charles-Edwards and David Dumville and Professor Patrick Sims-Williams for their kind and helpful comments on this article, but they are not responsible for the opinions expressed.