



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ARTHUR, THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING.

ENEMY OF THE ANGLO-SAXONS.

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Arthur, the once and future King.

Introduction

Of all the myths and legends of Britain the most enigmatic and intriguing hero is Arthur. Forget the late romantic versions of the later medieval period, the knights of the round table, Camelot, Gwynevere, Lancelot, the Green Knight and a hundred and one other mystical and mythical characters and instead, look for a late Romano warlord who, for a generation, halted the Saxon advance into the west of Britain.

Dark Age

Only one so called 'Dark Age' source actually names Arthur. Nennius, a 9th century Welsh monk in his history of Britain claimed that he was the leader of the Britons of sub Roman Britain and that he fought 12 great battles, culminating in the great British victory at Badon Hill or Mons Badonicus.

The name of Arthur may have evolved from the Roman surname, Artorius or from the Celtic word for bear, Artorios, which meant some of the bear'.

There was another Romano British warlord who predated Arthur, one Aurelius Ambrosias. This name is certainly a Roman Patrician class one and gives substance to the belief that a ruling class of high ranking Romano-British leaders did emerge after Rome withdrew its military and that Roman culture and military practices continued to thrive, especially in the south west of what is now England and that for a period, the Saxon menace was held at bay.

The subject of Arthur is too big a task to cover in this brief history and there are many historians who dismiss him as either a legendary figure or even a mixture of several British war leaders, merged into one superhero. There are also those who advocate that he was a real person and that centuries of embellishing his real story have evolved into what has become a fantastical fairy story.

There is so much material written about Arthur, that any individual has to make their own mind up as to what is fact or fiction so no attempt will be made here to influence any such beliefs. We know that warfare became endemic in Britain following the Roman Imperial withdrawal but the same was happening all over Europe and the provinces that had been part of the Western Roman Empire. Tribes from the Eurasian steppes caused a domino effect of migration from the east, initiated by Chinese successes against barbarian tribes and this spread westwards pitting vicious wars as the newcomers displaced the settled tribes as they in turn lost their lands to other aggressive migrating peoples.

The Western Roman Empire was assailed on all fronts. The Eastern Roman Empire, by far the richer of the two areas, could or would not seek to reunify the Empire and that, in fact, both parts would actually play barbarians off against each other.

The late Roman Empire of the 5th century would have appeared as a failed state to the likes of a Julius Caesar or Augustus.

The Western Roman army still fielded Legions but they were not the ferocious and terrifying units of the Republic or the high Empire. Discipline, military doctrine had fundamentally changed and most Roman soldiers were none Italians and many were recruited from Barbarian tribes as were many of the army's commanders.

Alaric

Alaric, whose Visigothic army, sacked Rome in 410 AD, had been an officer in the Roman army and Odoacer, who disposed of the last Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, in 476, had been a Roman general and a Patrician, even though he was of Germanic origin. When he entered Rome, he led an army that had been in Roman service and which looked and behaved as a late Roman army. He abolished

the role of Emperor and was declared King of Italy. It's doubtful that the citizens of Rome saw any difference and the Roman senate continued to operate until 603 AD.

The Western Roman army's last great victory had been the defeat of the Hun, Atilla, on the 20th of June 451 AD at the battle of the Catalaunian plains, near Troyes in France. The Romans were supported by so called barbarian allies such as Visigoths, Franks, Burgundians and, this is a verified fact, Saxons. There is even a suggestion that Romano British cavalry may have also been present, though this is not verified. The Huns too, had allies, including factions of Burgundians, Franks, Gepids and Amali Goths, amongst others.

The above clearly demonstrates the effects of mass migration of displaced tribes and the fluid allegiances that were made.

The whole of Western Europe was experiencing this and as the concept of Empire faded the warring tribal states were starting the long path to forming the nation states that we know today.

Britain was no exception to this changing environment. The Celtic peoples, the remaining Romans, and the northern peoples such as the Scots and Picts were all in the mix and joining this would be Saxons, Jutes, Angles, Friesians and Franks and probably lesser tribal peoples too.

Whilst it true that relatively small numbers of the aforementioned Germanic tribes had been recruited to serve in the late British Roman army and then into the retinues of Romano British warlords, it was the great tribal migrations in continental Europe and the dissolution of Imperial Roman control that was the catalyst for what is now England becoming an Anglo Saxon nation, even though the process would take centuries to achieve. War was the engine that would drive this and warfare was endemic in Britain throughout this period.

About Arthur

So what about Arthur. Welsh annals record British victories against the barbarous Saxons and there are clues in the Anglo Saxon Chronicles as well. In the early Saxon period, the chronicles record victories over the British or Welsh but they don't mention defeats. There is a distinct lack of Saxon progress during the first half of the 6th century which when compared to the British records of that time, seem to suggest that they met their match and that the Britons were able to halt Saxon expansion westwards. It appears that whilst the Britons achieved this, that they were unable to employ sufficient drive and strength to expel the Saxons from the Island.

This period fits into the time frame of Arthur. Currently there are lots of theories but no definitive evidence and it's likely that we will never know for sure unless some unlikely documentary evidence comes to light. It is most likely that a Romano British warlord, The Dux Bellorum, did arise from the chaos of the age of mass migrations and for a while, at least, that Roman Britain had its last hurrah.

Nennius names that Arthur was victorious in the below named battles.

The river Glein. Likely against Angles and Bernicians in the north east.

Four battles were fought in an area called Dubglas. A number of rivers bore this name, but two in particular could be the locations. Southern Scotland, which suggests that Arthur fought against northern Britons and Picts, or Lincolnshire which would indicate that the enemy were East Anglian Saxons.

The sixth battle was fought on a river called Bassas. Cambuslang in the south of Glasgow seems to be the most likely site for this battle.

The seventh battle is named as Celidon Coit. This may have been the great Caledonian Forest, which spread from the Solway Firth to the Scottish Highlands. It would appear that the enemies were Picts. It is known for certain that a battle took place at Arthuret in Cumbria in 573 AD between North Britons and invading Scots. This is too late for Arthur but the name of the battle may indicate some connection to an earlier event.

The eighth battle was at Guinnion fort. Location not known

The ninth battle was that of Urbe Legionis, the city of the Legion. This is likely Chester.

The tenth battle was on the river Tribruit, possibly the Ribble in Lancashire.

The eleventh battle was Mons Agned, possibly Edinburgh but again, there are other possibilities.

The twelfth battle is the famous Mons Badonicus or Mount Badon. The Saxons were the enemy and they suffered a catastrophic defeat. The location is likely near Bath.

Arthur's last battle was fought at Camlann against a certain Mordred or Medraut. Both died in this battle and its location is unknown though there is a belief that it may have been on Hadrian's wall at Birdoswald or at a location in South Wales.

It is virtually impossible to identify Roman and early medieval battlefields in Britain because there were so many of them, hundred of them and for everyone recorded, dozens more were not. Many late medieval battle sites have also not been identified either.

You must form your own opinion of the existence of Arthur because nobody can lay down a convincing case for him being an actual individual. Nonetheless, legend or not, his name is indelibly etched into the history of Britain and the dawn of the Anglo Saxon age.

Of some note, one Aurelius Ambrosias was mentioned earlier. He was a successful Romano British warlord who also held the title Dux Bellorum (battle lord). He appears to have existed and that he had a brother called Uther. Arthur's father was allegedly one Uther Pendragon!

There are grains of truth in the legends of the period but for me I think that this is an impossible task to solve.