IN SEARCH OF AN HISTORICAL ARTHUR

Background

There can be few subjects that have inspired more writers than the historicity of 'Arthur', so I take up my pen to contribute to the discussion with trepidation. The bald facts are that there is almost no solid evidence of the existence of this most famous of semi-mythological figures, and any useful insight on the topic can only be based on circumstantial evidence.

However, I believe that there is circumstantial evidence which at least makes the existence of such a figure plausible.

In terms of the period under review, I think there is general agreement that if there was an historical Arthur, he was active during the period when the Anglo-Saxons were gradually taking control of the whole of modern England. This was a very extensive period, from the arrival of the first Anglo-Saxon settlers in the east of England in the mid-5th century to the final conquest of Cornwall in the early 9th century (e.g. the Battle of Kingston Down in 838).

To set the scene, after the Roman legions were withdrawn from Britian in AD 409, the British population expelled the Roman appointed governors of the country. Britain went into a steep decline. It was ravaged by plagues which reduced the population from a few million to less than one million, and, defenceless without the legions, it was plundered by Saxon pirates and the Picts.

In desperation, in about AD 446 the British chieftains pleaded with the Roman military to send assistance. According to Gildas, writing in the second quarter of the 6th century, they wrote to 'Agitius' (generally taken to be Aetius, the *magister militum* of the western Roman army) in these terms; 'To Agitius, thrice consul: the groans of the Britons – The barbarians drive us to the sea, the sea drives us to the barbarians; between these two means of death we are either killed or drowned.'

The reply is not known, but the Romans clearly felt unable or disinclined to assist. Aetius was busy defending Gaul against Germanic invaders.

The British economy reverted to subsistence farming, and industries like potteries and metal working fell into decline. No new coins entered circulation, and barter must have become the main means of trade. As a result, the cities started to wither, as their populations moved to the countryside to feed themselves. The construction of buildings in stone ceased, existing roads and buildings crumbled, and British society gradually reverted to an Iron Age way of life, living in wooden round houses.

London ('*Londinium*'), the largest city in Roman Britain, was abandoned in c.AD 450, and was not resettled until AD 600. Cirencester (*'Corinium'*), the second largest city in Roman Britain, may not have been completely abandoned, but its population shrank,

and it ceased to be a town. St Albans ('*Verulanium*' (was still flourishing when Bishop Germanus of Auxerre visited in AD 429, and possibly again at a later date in the 460s, but it was abandoned in the late 5th century. Wroxeter ('*Cornoviorum*') was abandoned in the late 4th or early 5th centuries.

The expulsion of the Roman governors left Britian with no national civilian authority. It is my belief that Roman rule was replaced by the tribal structures of the pre-Roman period, and that national government disappeared completely.

The Anglo-Saxon *Adventus*

I intend to focus on what I call the first phase of the Anglo-Saxon settlement in England, from about AD 450 to AD 500. We will later see that the earliest author on this period dates the arrival of the first Anglo-Saxons to AD 449. The legend has it that a British king called Vortigern invited some Danes (Jutes) to settle on the Isle of Thanet in Kent, at the mouth of the Thames estuary, presumably to help secure the Thames Estuary from the raids of Saxon pirates. I think that Vortigern, if he existed, would have been a chief of the Celtic tribe which inhabited Kent, called the Cantii or Cantabri (from which the county derives its name).

Another group of Danes occupied the Isle of Wight shortly afterwards. Whether they were invited to do so – in order to secure the Solent from Saxon pirates – or whether they did so of their own volition is unclear.

A few years after the Danes settled on the Isle of Thanet, the British got tired of supplying their necessities and asked them to leave. But the Danes refused, and when the British sought to remove them by force, they were soundly defeated. Thereafter the Danes would have needed to take more land in mainland Kent to farm and provide for themselves.

Elsewhere, Angles and Saxons, who were mostly farmers, settled in some of the coastal areas of eastern England in relatively small numbers. We need to recall that the east coast of England looked very different in the mid-5th century, compared to its current appearance. For example, the majority of Lincolnshire is 5 metres below sea level, and consisted of marshland which was drained in the 19th century. In the 5th and 6th centuries, a huge area to east and west of the Lincolnshire Wold (relatively high ground) was marshy. The effect was that the Wold projected as a peninsula into the North Sea, with Lincoln itself at the base of the peninsula.

Similarly, the marshy Fens extended from southern Lincolnshire and the Wash down to Cambridge, leaving Norfolk as a large peninsula of land in East Anglia. It was in these remote areas that the first Anglo-Saxons came to England, perhaps driven out of what is now the Netherlands, southern Denmark and northern Germany by the Huns driving westward from Central Asia.

Britain was very sparsely populated at the time. So, the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons probably did not much inconvenience the British at the start. Indeed, the immigrants may have been welcome as affording some protection to the coastal areas from Saxon and Pictish pirates.

The genetic evidence shows that the incomers inter-married with the locals, such that today, every native Briton still carries a substantial 'British' genetic inheritance. More so, it must be admitted, in the west than in the east of England, but even in the east British genes make up a substantial minority of the total.

However, I think the process of inter-marriage occurred somewhat later. At the start, the British and Anglo-Saxons mixed about as well as water and oil. No doubt Britons and Anglo-Saxons co-existed in neighbouring villages without much conflict. But I am sure they cordially despised each other.

Firstly, they spoke completely different languages, and it is evident from the fact that very few loan-words from the Brythonic tongue survive in modern English that the Anglo-Saxons made no effort to learn the language of their hosts.

Secondly, the Anglo-Saxons called the locals '*wealas'*, a word which we might translate as 'Welsh', but which in their terms equally meant 'slaves'.

Thirdly, we know from the laws of King Ine of Wessex, about 250 years later (he died in c. AD726) that the Anglo-Saxons practised a system of apartheid. The '*wealas*' were treated as second-class citizens with limited rights.

For their part, the British were probably equally disdainful of the immigrants. They could not read or write (only the British clergy could), they did not build in stone or build, or even repair, roads, (in fairness, the British themselves had long ceased to do any of these things) and they worshiped pagan gods.

A privileged few in Britain still clung to the *chimera* of a Roman lifestyle. Even in the 5th century, a new Roman mosaic was laid down at Chedworth Roman villa in Cheltenham. But in fairness to the Anglo-Saxons, they were not just cultural iconoclasts; they could produce elaborate and beautiful metalwork and jewellery. Although the British were famous for their musical (especially choral) ability, the grave of a Saxon lady buried with her lyre shows that the Anglo-Saxons, too, were partial to a tune.

The initial settlors were followed by more immigrants, no doubt encourage by reports from the early pioneers that the land was fertile, and the British were feeble, and fairly rapidly the areas colonised by the Anglo-Saxons expanded. By the end of the 5th century, an Anglo-Saxon hegemony had been established all down the east coast, from Northumbria to Essex and along the south-east coast including Kent and Sussex. London itself had been abandoned,

Then in about AD 495, the 'West Saxons' took control of Winchester, the former capital city of the Belgae tribe. I think this was a cataclysmic blow to the Romano-British natives. But if not then, at some point, the natives said, 'enough is enough'.

It is around this time that we may hope to discover an historical Arthur. And we need to search for him in the contact zones between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons. I say the contact zones because it is unlikely that a distinct line could have been drawn between the territories of the opponents. Britain was still sparsely populated, and the system of government, on each side, was likely based on village eldermen, rather than being a national polity.

The archaeological evidence largely supports the above theory of the disposition of the Anglo-Saxons in 5th century Britain. Known cemeteries containing 5th century Anglo-Saxon inhumations are as follows:

Abingdon, Oxfordshire
Bergh Apton, Norfolk
Berinsfield, South Oxfordshire
Blacknail Field, Pewsey, Wiltshire
Buckland Far, Dover, Kent
Cleatham, North Lincolnshire
Collingbourne Ducis, Wiltshire
Elsham, North Lincolnshire
Fordcroft, Orpington, London
Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire
Mucking, Essex
Overstone, Northamptonshire
Ozengell, Thanet, Kent
Sancton, East Yorkshire
Sarre, Kent
Scranby, Skegness, Lincolnshire
Sewerby, East Yorkshire
Spong Hill, North Elmham, Norfolk
Stanton, Ixworth, Suffolk
Stretton-on-Fosse, Warwickshire
Tranmer House, Bromeswell, Suffolk
Wasperton, Warwickshire
Wendover, Buckinghamshire

Most of these locations are consistent with an east-of-England disposition, together with some incursions in the Thames valley. However, there are two locations on Salisbury Plain (Blacknail Field and Collingbourne Ducis in Wiltshire) (which may be evidence of the first West Saxon settlers) and two in Warwickshire (Stratton-on-Fosse and Wasperton). The latter seems to predate the Anglo-Saxon *adventus*, since it contains a mixture of Roman and Anglo-Saxon graves. It seems that it represents an earlier arrival of Anglo-Saxon *foedorati* in the employment of the Roman army.

Similarly, there are Anglo-Saxon inhumations at Dyke Hills and the Minchin Recreation Ground in Dorchester-on-Thames which date from about AD 400, and which may be evidence of earlier trading links between the Thames and Continental Europe.

Most of these graveyards contain relatively small numbers of burials, say 30 – 150, often spread over a considerable period (in some cases, centuries). However, the site at Spong Hill in Norfolk contains about 2,600 graves (the largest known Anglo-Saxon cemetery), the site at Cleatham in Lincolnshire contains 1,508 graves, Lovedon Hill in Lincolnshire contains 1,329 burials and cremations, and the site at Mucking in Essex contains 800. Several of the sites in Kent contain more than 400 graves.

Although the concentration of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Norfolk and Lincolnshire is clear, this does not mean that these areas were uniformly Anglo-Saxon by the end of the 5th century. In Lincoln, the area immediately around the city itself contains few early Anglo-Saxon inhumations or cremations. As Dr Caitlin Green puts it:

'For example, in the 'peripheral' Loveden and Kirton-in-Lindsey areas we have thousands of burials dating probably from the fifth century onwards in the great Anglian cremation cemeteries, with sometimes many hundreds in the nearby inhumation cemeteries of this area too (for example, the inhumation cemetery at Sleaford probably contained around 600 burials). However, closer to Lincoln itself, most of the known cemeteries apparently present by the seventh century only contain 5, 10 or 15 graves, and a phasing of these indicates that small Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries only really encroached into the area around Lincoln after the early sixth century.'

So, the city of Lincoln itself, together with a considerable area around it, seems to have remained a British outpost long after the surrounding countryside had become a German colony, eventually becoming the minor Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Lindissi (sometimes Lindsey or Linnuis).

The site at Overstone in Northamptonshire is of particular interest to me, but not because it is especially large. It contains about 154 graves, deposited from the 5th to tne 11th centuries, but more impressively, the cemetery contained more than 3,000 grave goods, and the remains of an Anglo-Saxon settlement were found nearby. What makes it particularly interesting to me is that it is located near the River Nene, and it may therefore be evidence of Anglo-Saxon incursions up that river from the Wash. It lies about 13 miles east of Watling Street (of which more later).

The Stanwick Lakes Nature Reserve, Northamptonshire, in the Nene Valley has yielded extensive archaeology, demonstrating that this was an important site from the Bronze Age to the end of the Romano-British era. The inhabitants were farmers, hunters and fish-farmers. The walled Roman town of Durobrivae (now Water Newton) guarded the bridge where Ermine Street crossed the River Nene, and this town was a centre of a pottery industry in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. To get to Overstone in the 5th century, we may assume that the Anglo-Saxons passed under the bridge at Water Newton, and by implication that Ermine Street was perhaps under Anglo-Saxon control.

Such was the geo-political disposition of the Anglo-Saxon *adventus* by the end of the 6th century. Note, in particular, that there is no evidence at all that the Anglo-Saxons were present in Bath, Somerset or any other part of the West Country during the 6th century, nor that they were anywhere near Wales or Scotland at that time. We have seen that Winchester was allegedly captured by the Anglo-Saxons (under Cedric) in c. AD 495, and Hampshire may have been the westernmost extent of their hegemony at the turn of the century.

Arthurian Literature

It is against this background that we can examine what little documentary evidence of Arthur exists. He is first named in 'The Goddodin', a poem written by the Welsh bard Aneirin, in AD 594. Teliesin, a contemporary of Aneirin, references Arthur as the victor of the Battle of Badon. The Welsh traditions are later amplified in the early-9th century work of Nennius, a Welsh monk, who is traditionally regarded as the author of the '*Historia Brittonum*'. This contains a list of twelve battles that Arthur is said to have fought and won, at places which can no longer be securely identified.

What is striking is that Arthur is not mentioned by Gildas (died 570?) in his work about the Anglo-Saxon conquest entitled '*De excidio et conquestu Britanniae'* (the overthrow and conquest of Britain). He does write about a British commander Ambrosius Aurelianus and the battle at Mons Badonicus, but not Arthur.

The other main literary source for the early medieval period in Britain is the 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People' by the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede, completed c. AD 731. This again makes no mention of Arthur, but it does refer to the battle of Badon Hill. The text reads as follows:

'When the victorious invaders had scattered and destroyed the native peoples and returned to their own dwellings, the Britons slowly began to take heart and recover their strength, emerging from the dens where they had hidden themselves, and joining in prayer that God might help them to avoid complete extermination. Their leader at this time was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man of good character and the sole survivor of Roman race from the catastrophe. Among the slain had been his own parents, who were of royal birth and title. Under his leadership the Britons took up arms, challenged their conquerors to battle, and with God's help inflicted a defeat on them. Thenceforth victory swung first to one side and then to the other, until the Battle of Badon Hill, when the Britons made a considerable slaughter of the invaders. This took place about forty-four years after their arrival in Britain: but I shall deal with this later.' Frustratingly, he never returned to the subject.

This account evidently draws heavily on that of Gildas, but Bede provides us with a date for the Battle of Badon. Since he dates the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons 'in three longships' to AD449, his chronology implies a date for the Battle of Badon of AD 493. This date had been hotly debated among scholars who have proposed a variety of dates in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, with a median value of about AD 500. The exact

date does not greatly matter, from the point of view of my thesis, but it probably makes more sense if it was before AD501-3, the putative date of a war between the Frankish army of Clovis and the Armoricans.

The only other British commander of the mid-to-late 5th century recorded in literature is a Riothamus, who was active in Gaul in c.AD470. He is named in the 6th century works of Jordanes, an Eastern Roman historian, who says that Riothamus brought a British army of c.12,000 to supplement a Roman force fighting against the Goths, but his force was intercepted and destroyed before it could unite with the Romans. The academic historian Léon Fleuriot has suggested that Riothamus was Ambrosius Aurelianus, noting that they were contemporaries (and that it is unlikely that there were two British commanders with substantial forces under their command at the same time). 'Riothamus' is an honorific title meaning Great King, which could have been applied to Ambrosius Aurelianus. Others have suggested, less persuasively in my opinion, that Riothamus was Arthur (e.g. Geoffrey Ashe).

Nennius adds some important colour in his descriptions of Arthur, whom he identifies as the victor of 12 battles, including Mount Badon He wrote 'Then it was that the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror.'

The Alleged Armorican Connection

This much is common knowledge. However, what has not attracted so much attention among Arthurian scholars is the relatively well-documented late 5th century history of Armorica, in north-western Gaul. There are striking parallels between events in Britain, following the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, and events in Armorica, where the local population, including some British settlers, were under pressure from the encroaching Franks.

Briefly, the ruler of the remains of the Roman province in Gaul from AD 464 or 465 was Syagrius, until his defeat by the Frankish King Clovis in AD486 at Soissons, near Paris. Clovis united all of the Franks under his rule, until his death in Paris on 27 November AD 511. Clovis made a pact with the Ostrogoths in c.AD 493, he defeated the Alamanni in AD 496 and he forced the Burgundians to submit to his authority in about AD 500. During this process, Clovis had been baptised a Christion in about AD 496, partly under the influence of his Christian wife Clotilde, who he married in AD 492 or 493.

In about AD 501-3, he turned his attention to the Armoricans and tried unsuccessfully to subjugate them by force. Procopius, writing in the middle of the 6th century from what is now Israel, describes the events of this period as follows:

'By that time it so happened that the *Arborychi* (assumed to be Armoricans) had become soldiers of the Romans. And the Germans (the Franks) wishing to make these people subject to themselves, since their territory adjoined their own and they had

changed the government under which they had lived from of old, began to plunder their land and, being eager to make war, marched against them with their whole people. But the *Arborychi* proved their valour and loyalty to the Romans and shewed themselves brave men in this war, and since the Germans were not able to overcome them by force they wished to win them over and make the two peoples kin by intermarriage. This suggestion the *Aborychi* received not at all unwillingly: for both, as it happened, were Christians. And in this way they were united into one people, and came to have great power.'

It is believed that Procopius's source was a Frankish emissary, so this account is likely slanted toward a Frankish perspective. It is unlikely that this account flatters the achievement of the Armoricans in halting the most powerful army in Europe. Thereafter the Armoricans seem to have acknowledged Clovis as their overlord (perhaps as successor by right of conquest to the Roman governors of Transalpine Gaul*)*) but were (very unusually) exempted from having to pay him tribute and left largely to their own devices.

So, on the north side of the Channel, we have British forces being pressed by Germanic Anglo-Saxons from the east, and to the south of the Channel we have Armorican forces being pressed from the east by Germanic Franks. And the archaeological evidence is that the Franks and the Anglo-Saxons had strong trading links:
'The presence of Frankish objects in Kent, but also else- where in Anglo-Saxon England, has been an important aspect of the archaeology for the Early Medieval period. These can be dress fittings, such as brooches and buckles; weapons, such as the fauchard from Buckland cemetery II, Dover (Kent); and vessels such as the imported wheel - thrown Merovingian pottery (Evison 1979*). The issue of whether Frankish war leaders played a significant rôle in the fifth-century settlement of southern England has been debated at length (e.g. Evison 1965 and 1981; Hawkes 1986: 77-81), though in some cases at least we might be looking at Saxon warriors who had acquired Frankish weaponry and dress fittings (e.g. Welch 1983. 172: 222-3: Welch 1991: 262)'

- Cross-Channel Contacts between Anglo-Saxon England and Merovingian Francia: An Anglo-French Research Project', 2008)

In the circumstances, it is not impossible that the Britons in England and the Armoricans shared military resources, perhaps including experienced commanders. Obviously, the war in Armorica and the struggle for Britain, there must have been commanders of the forces opposed to the Germans, but we do not know their names for certain.

We do know that cooperation between the British and Armoricans had occurred in the past. Large forces had been transported across the Channel on many previous occasions, e.g. when Claudius Albinus took a legion to Gaul in c. AD 193, in AD 383 when the usurper Magnus Maximus took the forces from northern and western Britain across the Channel and in AD 407 when the usurper Constantine III took the remaining Roman legions in Britain to Gaul. The only difference in the late 5th century was that the Britons did not have access to the Channel ports east of Weymouth, so any crossing would have to have been made at the western end, being therefore much longer. A

plausible route, using places identified in Geoffrey of Monmouth's later pseudo-history, could have been Totnes-Guernsey-St Malo.

We can also deduce that the progress of the Germanic conquests of both Britain and northern France was significantly impeded for several years in the first half of the 6th century. Using the timeline provided by Bede and Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, after a British victory in the final decade of the 5th century at Mons Badonicus, the next significant Anglo-Saxon victories were the Battle of Beran Byrig (Barbery Castle, near Swindon) in AD556, the battle of Bedcanford in AD 571 when the Anglo-Saxons took Aylesbury and Eynsham, and the Battle of Dyrham in AD 577, when the Anglo-Saxons took Cirencester, Gloucester and Bath. There were no major battles, according to these sources, fought between 508 and 556. Meanwhile an uneasy truce prevailed in Brittany.

After the mid-6th century, the progress of the Anglo-Saxons in England became relentless, but for half a century they had been more-or-less stopped. So, who or what had stopped them?

Where Would we find Arthur?

I contend that the search for an historical Arthur needs to focus on the contact zones between the British and the Anglo-Saxons at the end of the 5th century, accepting that in much of England these would not have been capable of precise definition. In many areas, what we might have been able to observe would have been a patchwork of villages, some British and some Anglo-Saxon often cohabiting relatively peacefully.

To understand the possible contact zones, I think it helpful to consider the underlying tribal boundaries of the Celtic British. Some will say that the tribal boundaries of the British would have ceased to have any significance after nearly 400 years of Roman occupation, but I do not think that is necessarily the case. In AD 287 when the commander of the Roman fleet in the Channel, Carausius, declared himself Emperor of Britain and northern Gaul, he was described as a Menapian, a member of the Belgic tribe the Menapii. Such tribal distinctions were still being made a century and a half before the Anglo-Saxon *adventus*. And inscriptions in parts of England refer to tribal (including Catuvellauni) affiliations into the 4th century.

The early Anglo-Saxon settlement in England took over the territories previously ruled by the Iceni (in Norfolk), the Trinovantes (in Essex), the Cantii, or Cantiaci, (in Kent) and areas in the eastern part of the region previously controlled by the Coritani (in Lincolnshire). They rapidly expanded into the territory of the Regnenses (in Sussex), the Atrebates in the Thames Valley, and at the end of the 5th century the Belgae (in Hampshire and Wiltshire)

To the west of these areas, the resistance would have been led by the Brigantes, in the north, the Coritani, the Catuvellauni, the remaining Atrebates, the remaining parts of the territory of the Belgae (Bath and Somerset) and the Durotriges in Dorset. I want to focus in particular on the Catuvellauni, who were considered the most warlike of the

Celtic (or more accurately Belgic) tribes of Britain. Their name means 'war chiefs', and they led the resistance to the Roman conquest of Britain, according to Cassius Dio.

Their capital is thought to have been at Wheathampstead in what is now Hertfordshire, and their territory included Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and southern Cambridgeshire. We know there was substantial British resistance to the encroachment of the Anglo-Saxons, and these are exactly the sort of people we would expect to find leading it.

The Catuvellauni, in the front line against the Anglo-Saxons, protected the whole of western central England, including what are now Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, etc

In general, there were few natural boundaries between British and Anglo-Saxon territory, because in the east of England the rivers tend to run west-east. However, there were roads running in vaguely a north-south direction. We have seen that Ermine Street, the Roman road leading from London to Lincoln and York, had probably fallen under Anglo-Saxon control from an early date. But Watling Street, north of the Thames, runs from St Albans in Hertfordshire to Wroxeter in Shropshire. At its southern end, the road lies squarely within the territory of the Catuvellauni.

The origin of the name Watling Street is obscure, but one theory is that it meant 'street of the *wealas*' in the Anglo-Saxon tongue. In other words, that the Anglo-Saxons regarded it as the street of the Welsh. The road was later the south-western boundary of the Danelaw, being therefore the north-eastern boundary of the great Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex, so it's importance as a territorial boundary has endured for centuries. Traditionally, Boudica's last battle with the Romans was fought somewhere along the road in c.AD 61, so it already had a history of providing battlefields.

I am attracted to the theory that, by the end of the 5th century, Watling Street had become a boundary between the British (and specifically the Catuvellauni) and the Anglo-Saxons. We have seen that during that century, Anglo-Saxon encroachment up the Nene valley had brought them to within a few miles of Watling Street, and following the river to its source would have brought them to Arbury Hill, the tallest hill in Northamptonshire, On the summit of the hill are the remains of a square Iron Age fort.

Arbury Hill is the location of several springs, which are sources not only of the Nene, but also the Thames and the Severn. It is therefore likely that the site had a significance (possibly even religious) which is now lost on us. But inconveniently, from the point of view of exploring Anglo-Saxons, it lies about 8 miles west of Watling Street, in the territory of the Catuvellauni.

Now, why do I think that Arbury Hill is so interesting? In a charter dated to AD 944, it is referred to as Baddan Byrig, or in modern English, Mount Badon. Baddan Byrig is of course Old English, and it may be loosely translated as Hill of Springs, But, if it had a name in the Brythonic language, not even Gildas knew it. In modern Welsh it would be 'Bryn y Flynnhonau' and in Latin it would be 'Collis Fontium'. One of the victors in the

long war between the British and the Anglo Saxons was the English language, and its victory was both surprisingly quick and surprisingly early in date.

Does the literature provide any clues as to the location of Mount Badon? Gildas describes the battle of Mount Badon as a siege but does not make it clear who was besieging who or where the hill was. Much later, Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in the 12th century, states that the British were besieging the Anglo Saxons. He thought that the battle took place in Somerset, but this seems to me unlikely. Somerset is about 90 miles west of the nearest 5th-century Anglo-Saxon graveyards on Salisbury Plain. Nennius, writing in the early 9th century, does not tell us where Mount Badon was, but he was the first to claim that the commander of the British forces was Arthur, emphasising that he was not a king but a military commander ('*dux bellorum*').

The Later Arthurian Legends

Now that we have surveyed the geo-political landscape, we can spend some time examining how, and to what extent, the Arthurian legends match up with the known facts. Starting first with the account of Nennius. The first of the twelve battles in which Arthur was said to be engaged was at the mouth of the river Gleni (location unknown), The second, third, fourth and fifth were fought by another river, called the Duglas by the Britons, in Linnuis. The sixth battle was over the river called Bassas (location unknown). The seventh battle was fought in Celidon Forest, which is Kat Coed Celidon (location unknown). The eighth battle was at Fort Guinnion. The ninth battle was fought in the City of the Legion (presumably Caerleon, or possibly Chester or Colchester), The tenth battle was fought on the banks of the river Tribuit. (location unknown). The eleventh battle was fought on the hill called Bregouin (location unknown) and the twelfth battle was fought at Badon Hill.

Of these, one name which is instantly recognisable is that of Linnuis, being Lindsey or Lincolnshire. And it is entirely plausible that battles could have been fought in this convoluted part of the 'contact line'. It has been suggested (by Aaron Thompson in 1718) that Celidon Forest is Celidon Wood, near Lincoln. The 'City of the Legion' is doubtful, because the obvious candidate, Caerleon, is about 140 miles from any plausible contact zone. Even Chester was miles to the west of any conceivable flashpoint, and Colchester was probably firmly under Anglo-Saxon control.

The place where we might reasonably have expected to find a late 5th century battle between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons is Winchester. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Cerdic (AD 475? -534) and his brother came to England in AD 495 and founded the kingdom of Wessex. One of the strangest features of this story is that Cerdic is a Brythonic name, but we will let that pass.

The kingdom of Wessex, during Cerdic's lifetime was essentially what is now the county of Hampshire, including the New Forest, and extending at least as far north as Andover, where it is believed Cerdic was buried (based on information in a charter of AD 900 and research led by Paul Harper). It is therefore assumed that the 'West Saxons' captured Winchester shortly after their arrival in AD 495.

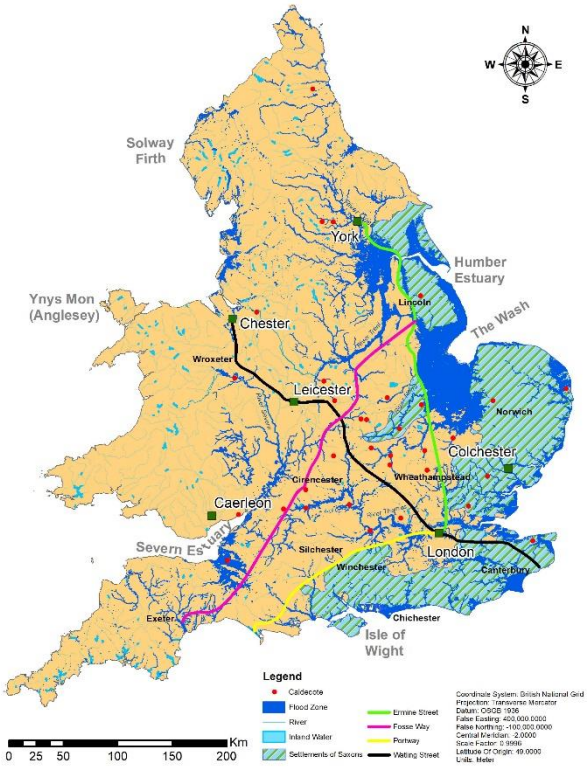
I have already said that I think that the central part of Watling Street may have formed the eastern border of the 'British' territory in England at the end of the 5th century. And I think that other Roman (or pre-Roman) roads may have defined the other borders of the area under British control. On the basis of the archaeology and legendary texts, it seems to me that the Fosse Way, north of Watling Street, may have been under British control (this was the section of the Fosse Way that led from High Cross in Leicestershire to Lincoln), and it seems possible that the southern border may have been defined by the Roman Road from London to Silchester ('*Calleva Atrebatum*'), one branch of which continued from Silchester to Dorchester and onwards to Exeter (the whole of this road is sometimes referred to as the Port Way). Silchester was the tribal capital of the Atrebates and was an impressive walled town.

The Port Way passes very close to Andover, which under Anglo-Saxon control in the early 6th century. In fact, the intersection of the Port Way with the Ermin Way (connecting Silchester with Cirencester) is located at East Anton, 1.5 miles north-east of Andover where Cerdic's Barrow is to be found.

I think it is significant that Cerdic's Barrow (or tomb) is located on a hillside facing north towards the Port Way. This feels like a statement, that he was defending his territory from the British tribes to the north in AD 534.

So, I believe that the Roman road network provides us with clues as to the location of Arthur's battles. The Roman roads in Britain were originally constructed for military purposes, and it is entirely logical that they may still have been serving military purposes in AD500, less than a century after the departure of the legions.

Settlement of the Anglo-Saxons in AD 500



Geoffrey of Monmouth claims that Winchester was captured by the Saxons at the end of the reign of Vortigern, which is not impossible, albeit that Vortigern would have had to have been very old. He also says that this is where 'Aurelius Ambrosius' (clearly Ambrosius Aurelianus) was poisoned by a Saxon called Eopa, who disguised himself as a British monk, clearly at a time when Winchester was still under British control. Later he says that Arthur won a victory over the British traitor Mordred there, but I suspect that Vortigern was not responsible for the loss of Winchester and Mordred had nothing to do with the city.

Geoffrey tells us that the original name of Winchester was *Kaerguinit*, and we know that the river which runs through the city still bears its Brythonic name Itchen (from the Celtic word '*issa*' which meant 'rapid running water'). None of these names bear any resemblance to the place names in the battle list of Nennius.

The Literature Supporting an Armorican Campaign

Having rejected parts of Geoffrey's account, I should say that I am not one of those who dismiss his book as entirely fabricated. He was a devout Christian, who would have believed that lying was a sin. However he was prone to embellishment and exaggeration, and his account needs to be taken with a large shovel-full of salt.

In a paper entitled 'Arthur – the Origins of the Anglo-Norman Legends' (see elsewhere on this site) I have explained that I think a main source for Geoffrey's 'History of the Kings of Britain' may have been a 12th century Bishop of Dôl in Brittany called Baudri de

Bourgeuil. If so, Geoffrey's work may have been based partly on a manuscript of Nennius and partly on Breton legends. The latter would have derived from the oral traditions of Wales and Cornwall, and while remote from any historical substance, may yet have contained some grains of truth.

Geoffrey's distinctive contribution to the legends of King Arthur were the addition of Arthur's alleged exploits in France or with his Armorican allies. This comes as no surprise, given that his sources may have included Breton folklore, but it is interesting to consider how well these tales match the known history of Armorica.

In terms of dating these adventures, Geoffrey says the Roman Emperor when Arthur invaded Gaul was Leo, which can only mean the Emperor from AD 457 to 474. He also says the climactic battle of the campaign took place at Soissons, which was the battle in which Clovis defeated Syagrius in AD 486. Although these were real historical events, there is no evidence that the British took part in the battle of Soissons, and if they had it seems likely that they would have fought for the defeated Roman Syagrius rather than Clovis, the victorious Frankish king. Moreover, Geoffrey describes the French campaign as taking place after the battle of Mount Badon, which we can fairly securely date to c. AD 500.

It is clear that Geoffrey knew some of the French history of this period and may indeed have read Gregory of Tours 'History of the Franks', which was written sometime between AD 560 and AD 590. But I think he simply introduced Arthur into that history to improve the credibility of his story. It may be that Arthur had connections to France, but I do not think he was connected to the events that Geoffrey says he was connected to.

Although Gregory is a main source on the history of the Franks, he is frustratingly silent on the events of the early years of the 6th century, possibly because the campaign in Armorica was unsuccessful. Gregory does write about the period after the death of Clovis, but his words are contradictory. At one point he says that 'from the death of King Clovis onwards the Bretons remained under the domination of the Franks, and their rulers were called counts and not kings', but he had just referred to 'the whole kingdom' of Brittany. Whatever their titular status, Gregory makes it clear that the Bretons continued to enjoy almost complete independence.

Gregory does not seem to have been especially prejudiced against the Bretons, but he probably had limited contact with them, despite the proximity of Tours and Brittany. He tells of his encounter with one in particular: 'At this time a Breton called Winnoch, who practised extreme abstinence, made his way from Brittany to Tours. His plan was to go on to Jerusalem. He wore no clothes except sheepskins from which the wool had been removed. He seemed to me to be a most pious man and in the hope of keeping him with me I ordained him as a priest.'

So, we are left with the works of Geoffrey and the 12th century romances. it should be stated at the outset that Geoffrey did not introduce us to the Knights of the Round Table or the Quest for the Holy Grail, although he does name some of Arthur's knights (Bedevere, Gawain and Kay) and also introduces us to Guinevere and Merlin. The more

chivalric elements of the legends were added later by Chrétien de Troyes (who introduced Lancelot and the Holy Grail), Wace (who introduced the Round Table) and Robert de Boron. If there is any historical substance to Lancelot he is, in my view, a creature of the late 6th century. (Is it possible that there was a count, or *comes*, of the *lan celtoi (*the Celtic shore*)*?)

I shall not dwell on the aspects of Geoffrey's account which are plainly derived from Nennius, because the '*Historia Brttonum'* is itself hearsay evidence, and Geoffrey's version is even more remote. So, I will not further discuss Arthur's alleged battles. Instead, I want to focus on the distinctive and original aspect of Geoffrey's work, the alleged adventures in Gaul and with Armoricans.

Although Geoffrey consistently refers to the people of North-Western France as Bretons, I use the term Armoricans because Armorica was not particularly British at the end of the 5th century. The British settlement of what became Brittany had indeed begun at the end of the 4th century when Magnus Maximus sent Conan Meriadoc to reinforce his claim to Gaul, but the mass migration started later.

Some Welsh monks emigrated in the 5th century (Brieuc, perhaps Tudy), but the main influx of Britons started in the 6th century and continued thereafter as the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England proceeded. These later arrivals may have included Gildas. It was only then that the British came to control Armorica, and that their language became the dominant language in the peninsula.

But before I look at the 'French' aspect of Geoffrey's work, it will be useful to set the geopolitical scene. Counter-intuitively, at the end of the 5th century. Armorica may have been militarily stronger than Britain. What made the Armoricans and the Britons plausible allies was not that they were both British (most of the Armoricans weren't), but the fact that they were both 'Romans'.

After the death of Syagrius (probably AD 486 or 487) at the Battle of Soissons, the Armoricans were left as the last bastion of Roman Gaul in northern France. As a result, Armorica became a sort of magnet for the remaining fragments of the Roman legions in Gaul. As Procopius puts it:

'Now other Roman soldiers, also, had been stationed at the frontiers of Gaul to serve as guards. And these soldiers, having no means of returning to Rome, and at the same time being unwilling to yield to their enemy who were Arians, gave themselves, together with their military standards and the land which they had long been guarding for the Romans, to the Arborychi and Germans; and they handed down to their offspring all the customs of their fathers, which were thus preserved, and this people has held them in sufficient reverence to guard them even up to my time. For even at the present day, they are clearly recognized as belonging to the legions to which they were assigned when they served in ancient times, and they always carry their own standards when they enter battle, and always follow the customs of their fathers. And they preserve the dress of the Romans in every particular, even as regards their shoes.'

Moreover, Armorica also attracted all sorts of waifs, strays, vagabonds and runaway slaves from the rest of Gaul, being a territory free from German rule, where the rights of slave-owners were not respected. The area had long been rather anarchic, and it had suffered from a plague of peasant- bandits called the *Bagaudae* from the 3rd century onwards.

As an example, in AD 472 Sidonius Apollinaris, Bishop of Clermont, wrote a letter to Riothamus asking him to resolve a complaint from a Roman subject that his slaves had been enticed away to Armorica.
'To his friend Riothamus
I will write once more in my usual strain, mingling compliment with grievance. Not that I at all desire to follow up the first words of greeting with disagreeable subjects, but things seem to be always happening which a man of my order and in my position can neither mention without unpleasantness, nor pass over without neglect of duty. Yet I do my best to remember the burdensome and delicate sense of honour which makes you so ready to blush for others' faults. The bearer of this is an obscure and humble person, so harmless, insignificant, and helpless that he seems to invite his own discomfiture; his grievance is that the Bretons are secretly enticing his slaves away. Whether his indictment is a true one, I cannot say; but if you can only confront the parties and decide the matter on its merits, I think the unfortunate man may be able to make good his charge, if indeed a stranger from the country unarmed, abject and impecunious to boot, has ever a chance of a fair or kindly hearing against adversaries with all the advantages he lacks, arms, astuteness, turbulences, and the aggressive spirit of men backed by numerous friends. Farewell.'

Meanwhile, Britain had been brought low by plagues, piracy and incompetent government. So, at the end of the century, Armorica was not only the sole potential ally to the beleaguered British, as they fought for their freedom against the Anglo-Saxons, it was a power in the region. The two territories had much in common – they were Romanised and Christian, and both faced a tide of German adversaries.

Against this background, what does Geoffrey have to say? I will provide a brief synopsis, stripping out the hyperbole and most of the dramatic flourishes.

a) When Arthur came to the throne, he sent messengers to King Hoël in Brittany to tell him of the disaster which had befallen Britain. (Hoël would be the equivalent of Hywel today). Arthur and Hoël were related.
b) Hoël arrived in Southampton with a force of Armoricans, and together with Arthur they marched to Lincoln, fighting with and defeating the Saxons.
c) They went on to win a battle which is not named, but which is clearly Mount Badon
d) After various other battles, Arthur travelled to Gaul with his fighting men, and fought with an adversary named Frollo, eventually subduing the whole of Gaul

This narrative vaguely fits with a campaign in Britain leading to a battle of Mount Badon in the period AD 493-500, followed by a campaign in Armorica in AD501-3. The additional colour provided by Geoffrey is that the Armoricans supported the British

campaign, and the British supported the Armorican campaign, which seems to me plausible.

I have found no historical match for Frollo.

Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is the major source for the Arthurian legends, but it is perhaps not the only source. It is thought that Chrétien de Troyes based part of his work on Breton *lais*, songs sung by Breton minstrels. Sadly no one thought to transcribe these songs at the time, so there are no surviving versions in the literary sources. It seems likely that they included Arthurian legends, but we will never know. What this does suggest is that the Arthurian legends were persistent in Breton folklore into the12th century and beyond, but whether they may have originated in Wales or Brittany is unclear.

Various sites in Brittany are named in the Arthurian legends (e.g., Quimper, Carhaix) but especially persistent is the identification in Breton folklore of the forest of Paimpont with the Arthurian forest of Brocéliande. However, there is no hard evidence to connect any of these places to any historical person or event of the Arthurian period. So, sadly, toponyms are of limited help to prove an Arthurian presence in Brittany, but as we shall see toponyms do link us to someone who has been identified as Arthur.

As for toponymic evidence for Hoël, this is complicated, because huel in Breton means tall. So, it is uncertain whether places like Porz Huel, Ker Huel and Huelgoat, refer to an individual named Hoël, or whether they were simply in some way tall. It is probable that Huelgoat means 'tall forest'. Plus, there was a Hoël II of Rennes, AD 1031 to 1084, (known as Houel Huuel in Breton), who could have inspired some place names. Otherwise, the figures of the Arthurian legends have left little trace on the landscape of Brittany.

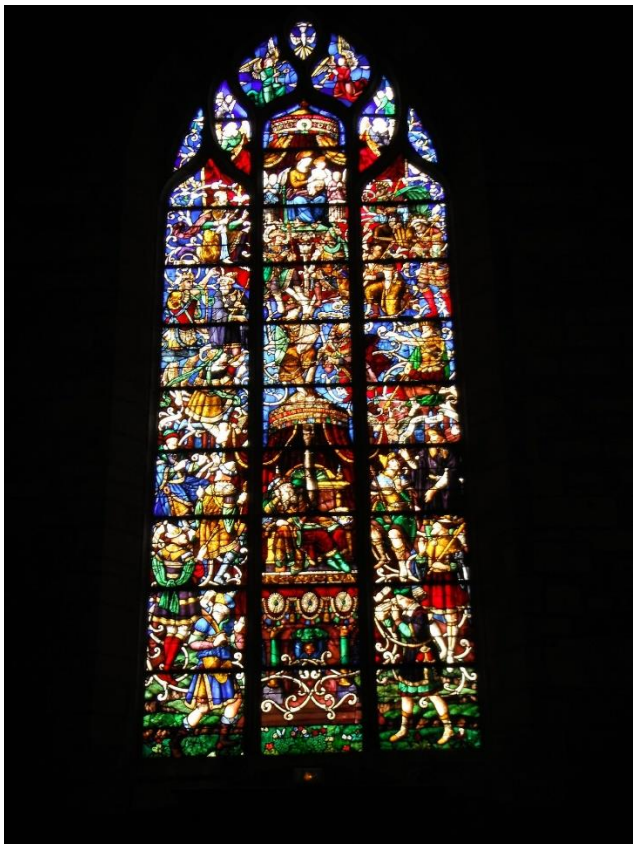
The Arthurian Cult in the Early Modern Era

There is one aspect of later history that I want briefly to explore. When the young Henry Tudor, Duke of Richmond and the future King Henry VII, was living in exile in Brittany (1471-1485), he evidently developed a fascination with the Arthurian legends. He probably saw himself as 'the once and future king', and he later named his first-born son Arthur.

Henry and some other Lancastrian refugees were housed at the Chateau de Suscinio in Sarzeau in the Morbihan, South Brittany. As it happens this is about 6.5 kilometres from St Gildas-de Rhuys, thought to be the place of exile of Gildas. Immediately to the north-east of Sarzeau is the town of St Armel, and in Breton tradition, St Armel is associated with King Arthur.

There are three churches dedicated to St Armel (in Welsh, Arthfael – literally 'wolf-prince') in the area around Sarzeau, one in Ploërmel (the parish of Armel'), immediately to the north-east of Sarzeau. There is a magnificent stained-glass window in the church

of Ploérmel, depicting the Tree of Life, which is clearly a representation of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table.



A stained-glass window in the church at Ploërmel represents 'The Tree of Life', but is clearly inspired by the court of King Arthur.

St Armel is said to have been a 5th or 6th century Breton prince, born in Wales to the wife of King Hoël, and the original Arthur. If that were true, he would have been the son (or at least the stepson) of King Hoêl, not Hoël's uncle (or his first cousin) as Geoffrey claimed at various points in his account. The Breton legend is that Arthur (St Armel) founded a monastery at Plouarzel in Brittany after the Battle of Camlann, and he was summoned from there to the court of King Childebert I of the Franks (c. AD 496-558).

None of this proves that 'King Arthur' was ever present in Brittany, and the connection may be an invention of later medieval romantics, but it certainly represents an aspect of Breton folklore which at least has the merit of longevity.

Henry returned to England, via Wales, in 1485 and seized the crown by defeating and killing 'bad King Richard' at the Battle of Bosworth Field. He then ruled successfully until his death in 1509. Henry was very fond of pageants, which were held frequently at his court, and which often contained plays on an Arthurian theme. He built the Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey, and he, his wife (Elizabeth of York), his mother (Lady Margaret Beaufort) and a total of 15 royals lie buried there.

Among these are the skeletal remains of what are assumed to be the Princes in the Tower (who were murdered on the orders of King Richard) which were found in 1674 under a staircase in the White Tower. They were Elizabeth of York's brothers. It is uncertain whether these remains are in fact those of the Princes, because the Royal family have never allowed them to be DNA tested,

Around the walls of the Lady Chapel are 95 statues of saints and kings, chosen by Henry himself. St Armel features twice. Since 1725, the Lady Chapel has been used for the installation of knights of the Order of the Bath.

It is abundantly clear that Henry believed in the Breton legends that Arthur had retired to South Brittany and ended his days in a monastery. However, I am not convinced. St Armel is credited with various miraculous happenings, such as defeating a dragon, but he is not reported to have won any battles. The reference in the legends of St Armel being summoned to the court of King Childebert I of the Franks (c.AD 496 – 558), suggests that this is unlikely to have happened before AD 520, which may be a little too late for Arthur.

One of the two statues of St Armel chosen by Henry VII to adorn the Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey.

Moreover, an Arthur who was a Breton prince would hardly fit the description of Nennius 'and though there were many more noble than himself, he was twelve times chosen their commander'. I think an historical Arthur, if he existed, must have been a professional soldier.

Conclusions

In conclusion, does any of this prove the existence of an historical Arthur? Absolutely not. But is it possible that there was an historical Arthur? Clearly yes. In fact, if not Arthur, there must have been one or more British military leaders at the end of the 5th century, and it seems that they successfully checked the advance of the Anglo-Saxons for half a century. We may not be able to clearly see an Arthur in the picture, but we can say that there is an Arthur-shaped hole in the history.

A potential reconstruction of the history might run along these lines;

What happened?

c.AD 449	Start of the Anglo-Saxon *adventus*
AD 450-	Continued Anglo-Saxon immigration. The defeat of the Cantii in Kent, and Anglo-Saxon dominion over Kent and Sussex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex eastern Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and southern Northumberland
Early AD 490s	West Saxon capture of Winchester, intrusions of the Anglo-Saxons across Watling Street in Northamptonshire and friction between Britons and Anglo-Saxons in Lincolnshire
Mid AD 490s	The Britons send to the Armoricans for assistance, and together they fight successfully in Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and possibly Hampshire, culminating in a victory at the Battle of Mount Badon
AD 501-	The Britons repay the favour by going to the assistance of the Armoricans against the Franks, successfully defending the peninsula from the most powerful army in northern Europe.
AD 540	Gildas is able to write 'and concerning the final victory of our country that has been granted to our time by the will of God'.

Who were the main actors?

As to the people involved, I see Vortigern as a British tribal chief of the early to mid 5th century, possibly a king of the Cantii. I see Ambrosius Aurelianus as a professional soldier of the mid 5thcentury, of a Romano-British heritage, and possibly a member of the Catuvellauni tribe. I see Riothamus as a contemporary of Ambrosius, possibly of West Country/Welsh origin, a professional soldier who spent much of his life in Brittany.

I see Hoël as a Breton king, possibly of Welsh origin, active in the late 5th century. I see Arthur as a professional soldier, possibly of the Catuvellauni tribe, also active in the late 5th century.

Were Ambrosius and Arthur of the Catuvellauni tribe?

In my paper 'The and of Cal', I suggest that there were significant and enduring differences between the Celtic tribes of western Britian and the Belgic tribes of lowlands England. These differences extended to slightly different languages.

In the Arthurian context, this distinction is illustrated by the writings of Gildas, who was probably himself from Wales. In his work De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae, Gildas pours scorn on five British 'kings', namely Constantine, Aurelius Canonus, Vortipor, Cuneglass and Maglocune. Constantine has been tentatively identified with the kingdom of Dumnonia, in south-west England, Vortipor ('tyrant of the Demetians') has been connected to Dyfed in Wales, Cuneglass has been connected to Penilyn in the

Gwynedd region in Wales, and Maglocune has been identified as Maelgwn, King of Gwynedd. Aurelius Canonus cannot be located to any particular area, but I do not think he can be connected to Ambrosius Aurelianus, as some have suggested. 'Aurelius' was simply a Roman honorific title.

Gildas does not mention any of the kingdoms of lowlands England. From this I deduce that he either did not know the names of those tribal leaders, or he was not interested in them. He probably does not name Vortigern (though two of the surviving manuscripts of De Excidio do - these are possibly later interpolations). He refers to Vortigern simply as 'that haughty tyrant' ('*superbus tyrannus'*).

He does of course name Ambrosius Aurelianus, as a hero figure, and it seems to me possible that Gildas encountered him at some point. For example, it is sometimes suggested the Gildas received some of his early education in Cirencester, and he may have been present on an occasion when Ambrosius vi/sited the city.

So, my conclusion is that Gildas was concerned only with the kingdoms of Wales and the West Country. He either did not know the names of the chieftains of the 'Belgic' tribes, or he took no interest in them. He therefore does not name Arthur, and nor should we expect him to. I think that rules out any connection between Arthur and Wales.

Based on my theory that the resistance to the Anglo-Saxons must have been led by the frontline tribes, like the Catuvellauni, I think it is probable that the commanders of the British force must have come from those tribes.

Why did it happen?

A rational explanation for the events might be as follows:

When the Romans left Britian in AD 407-409, the British expelled the Roman civil authorities. The country was left defenceless, and administratively chaotic.

Further weakened by plagues, which carried off perhaps two-thirds of the population, and suffering from raids by Saxon pirates and Picts, the country quickly reverted to a pre-Roman existence of subsistence farming, tribal affiliations, and a barter economy.

A Kentish chieftain called Vortigern sought protection from the external threats by employing a group of Danish mercenaries (Jutes), who he installed on the Isle of Thanet. Under their agreement, the Cantii had to provide all the necessities required by the mercenaries, and this soon became burdensome for them. They asked the Danes to leave, but their guests refused to do so. When the Cantii tried to eject them by force, they were soundly defeated. Thereafter the intruders took parts of Kent under their control.

There was steady immigration of Angles and Saxons in the east of England, such that the Britons started to become concerned that they might lose their country. Realising

that they had to create a standing army to replace the Roman legions, they sought out men experienced in the Roman army to form and train a fighting force. They appointed one Ambrosius Aurelianus to undertake the task, and the tribes all agreed to supply him with men and resources.

The size of this force is a matter of conjecture, but the standard unit in the Roman army was a legion of about 5,000 men and a cohort was 480 men. Presumably he was at least trying to raise a cohort.

Ambrosius fought various skirmishes with Anglo-Saxons, but there were no large-scale or decisive battles. Ambrosius died (in the 480s?) and was replaced by Arthur.

When the Anglo-Saxons took Winchester in the early 490s, the situation became critical. The Germanic colonists in Lincolnshire had almost isolated the city of Lincoln, and some Anglo-Saxons had crossed Watling Street into Northamptonshire. The British appealed to the Armoricans for assistance.

An Armorican force crossed into England and joined up with Arthur's army. Together they liberated Winchester, marched to Lincolnshire and inflicted several small defeats on the Anglo-Saxons. They then fought a larger scale battle with the Anglo-Saxons in Northamptonshire, at Arbury Hill, driving the intruders back across Watling Street.

With their borders in England secured, the British were able to repay their Armorican allies when they in turn needed assistance in a struggle against the Franks, under King Clovis. Command of the joint forces may have been entrusted to Arthur, as the most experienced of their military leaders. However, as a transient presence in Armorica, Arthur left no toponymic trace of his passing.

Arthur then went on to fight a civil war against rebel British tribes, but I deal with that elsewhere (see 'Mordred').