

## MORDRED

### Background

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles for AD 573 record a Battle of Arfderydd at Arthuret in Cumbria where 'Briton fought Briton and weakened their numbers', so we have reason to believe that conflict between the British tribes continued after the Anglo-Saxon *adventus*.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his pseudo-history 'Historia Regum Britanniae' tells us that Arthur fought battles against a British rebel called Mordred, in places like Winchester, and that he was mortally wounded in a final battle at Camlann in Cornwall (fighting either alongside or against Mordred). The purpose of this paper is to try to understand whether Geoffrey's account is at all plausible.



A gold brooch featuring a Celtic warrior, from the collection of the British Museum

My starting point is the tribal divisions of Britain. I have written elsewhere (see 'The Land of Cal') that I think there was a significant divide between the Celtic tribes of western Britain and the 'Belgic' tribes of lowlands England, which probably survived the long period of Roman occupation. I have said that it seems more likely that Arthur, if such a person existed, would have come from the Belgic tribes that were in the front line against the Anglo-Saxon invasion. A likely candidate would be the Catuvellauni tribe which occupied the area north of the River Thames, in what is now Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Southern Cambridgeshire.

The tribe which inhabited Cornwall were called the Cornovii. But there were two other tribes of identical name in Britain, one centred on present day Shropshire (their capital was at Wroxeter) (*Virconium Cornoviorum*) and one at Caithness in northern Scotland. It has been suggested that all of the Cornovii were related, and probably were originally

a sea-faring Celtic tribe which migrated up the western coasts of Europe. These tribes would definitely have been in the Celtic camp, rather than the Belgic camp.

Although separated by a considerable distance, the Cornovii in the West Midlands and the Cornovii in Cornwall could have communicated with each other by means of the River Severn.

So, on the face of it, continuing struggles between a Catuvellaunian (and therefore Belgic) British leader and a Celtic leader of the Cornovii, would be plausible. These tribes had been fighting each other for centuries.

However, no trace of anyone called Mordred has hitherto been identified in place names or archaeology, so this figure is as mysterious as the Arthur of legend.

### **An Observation**

In the Domesday Book (written in AD 1086), Moddershall in Staffordshire was called Mordredeshale. Moddershall is 34 miles north-east of Wroxeter, lying just to the east of the River Trent, which is thought to have formed the eastern boundary of the territory of the Cornovii.

### **A Hypothesis**

If a person of importance called Mordred can be linked to a place on the boundary of the territory of the Cornovii in the Western Midlands, and if he is reported to have been fighting in Cornwall, in a battle presumably involving the Cornish Cornovii, he may have been a leader of a revolt of the Cornovii (and possibly other Celtic tribes) against domination by the Belgic tribes of Britain.

### **Conclusion**

I think this is a plausible explanation for a battle between British tribes, which took place in Cornwall. The fact that Mordred appears to have been memorialised in a place name, suggests that he was an important man (he owned a 'hall'), and the fact that the place is located on the frontier of his tribal lands suggests that he was a military commander