

## The Real King Arthur

*Ingrid*

According to legend, King Arthur Pendragon lived in a legendary time which is never given a specific date. Most modern opinion believes that, if he existed at all, it may have been when the Angles and Saxons were conquering Britain, only decades after the Romans left and shortly (historically speaking) before the Vikings started raiding the east coast. However, it is very difficult to place the time when Arthur existed precisely, because of the lack of evidence. Assuming that there was a real Arthur, one of the possible ways to date his life is to establish a firm date for what is claimed to have been the most decisive battle of the Saxon era, Mount Badon.

The lack of written sources from the era of Saxon migration, after the departure of the legions and before the conversion of the pagans to Christianity, can be the only time in which an "Arthur, King of the Britons" may have existed. The historical record before and after this period will not allow him to exist, but there there are few sources for this "dark" invasion period.

A recent article by Tony Jebson, published on the Internet, deals with the lack of sources for this period. According to Jebson, accounts of the fifth century rest heavily on a very small number of sources: *De Exidio Conquestu Britanniae*, (Gildas), *The Life of St. Germanus (Constantius)*, and a few entries in the *Gallic Chronicles*. Bede's *De Ecclesia Anglorum et Gentes* draws very heavily on the first two of these. None of these mention Arthur. However, Arthur may not have actually been his name. Phillips & Keatman argue that Arthur was a title meaning "Bear", (p.154), so the legendary king probably had quite a different name. This is important to remember when using contemporary sources to find out about him, because they may have used his real name, rather than the title Arthur. In fact, most of the stories, poems and songs about Arthur didn't come into circulation until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. According to Jebson, Gildas is the only contemporary source with any real detail. The *Gallic Chronicles* (known after their last entries as 452 and 551) add only a little information:

The 452 Gallic Chronicle for AD 441 notes:

The provinces of Britain, which up to that time had been harassed by various disasters and accidents, are brought under the control of the Saxons. While the 551 Chronicle for AD 441 says:

The British provinces, lost by the Romans, fell under the sway of the Saxons.

How this information reached the chronicles, which were probably written in Gallia Narbonensis, is uncertain but may have been given by refugees from Britain such as those who resettled in Brittany and Northern Spain. If these accounts have any credibility then by AD 441 the initial conquest of parts of Britain had already started. Gildas is the most detailed source for the fifth century. According to his account, the Britons first invited Saxon mercenaries into the island. This was a mistake, since the mercenaries turned on them. This is how he describes the events of that century:

"Then all the members of the council, together with the proud tyrant, were struck blind; the guard - or rather the method of destruction - they devised for our land was that the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken!), hated by man and God, should be let into the island like

wolves into the fold, to beat back the peoples of the North. Nothing more destructive, nothing more bitter has ever befallen the land. Then a pack of cubs burst forth from the lair of the barbarian lioness, coming in three keels, as they call warships in their language. The mother lioness learnt that her first contingent had prospered, and she sent a second and larger troop of satellite dogs. The barbarians who had been admitted to the island asked to be given supplies, falsely representing themselves as soldiers ready to undergo extreme dangers for their excellent hosts. The supplies were granted, and for a long time 'shut the dog's mouth'. Then they again complained that their monthly allowance was insufficient, ..., and swore that they would break their agreement and plunder the whole island unless more lavish payment were heaped on them. There was no delay: they put their threats into immediate effect. In just punishment for the crimes that had gone before, a fire heaped up and nurtured by the hand of the impious easterners spread from sea to sea. It devastated town and country round about, and once it was alight, it did not die down until it had burned almost the whole surface of the island and was licking the western ocean with its fierce red tongue. All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants - church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press. there was no burial to be had except in the ruins of houses or the bellies of beasts and birds - saving the reverence due to their holy spirits, if indeed many were found at that time to be carried by holy angels to the heights of heaven. For by then the vineyard that had once been good had degenerated into sourness, so that (as the prophet puts it) there was rarely to be seen grape-cluster or corn-ear behind the backs of the vintagers and the reapers". (Gildas: De Exidio Conquestu Britanniae)

Although Gildas painted a gory picture of death and destruction, Jebson points out that the Latin used by Gildas indicates a high level of education and learning. He finds it hard to believe that civilization was totally obliterated in Britain because Gildas himself seems so well educated.

Why would Gildas write about the destruction of civilization, says Jebson, if it did not happen in such a violent and sudden way? In the first place, because he had a special purpose in writing about events in this way. He wanted to persuade the people of his own time to abandon their wicked ways and live their lives in accordance with Christian virtues. In order to achieve this purpose, he drew a picture of barbarian slaughter - the wrath of God descending on a wicked people (the Britons). It is quite possible, says Jebson, that the old "Roman" way of life had slowly declined until, in Gildas' time, many of the towns and cities were derelict and neglected. This, he points out, is the situation revealed by archaeologists, who have found little evidence of destruction. Gildas, says Jebson, was unaware of this slow decline and assumed that the towns must have been destroyed by the Saxons.

In an attempt to further narrow the possible dates for Arthur, we can probably look to Mount Badon. Gildas mentions Badon Hill as the place where the Saxons suffered a major defeat at the hands of Ambrosius Aurelianus, the 'last of the Romans'.

"After a time, when the cruel plunderers had gone home, God gave strength to the survivors. Wretched people fled to them from all directions, as eagerly as bees to the beehive when a storm threatens, and begged wholeheartedly, "burdening heaven with unnumbered prayers", that they should not be altogether destroyed. Their leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a

gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it. 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: so that in this people the Lord could make trial (as he tends to) of his latter-day Israel to see whether it loves him or not. This lasted right up till the year of the seige of Badon Hill, pretty well the last defeat of the villains, and certainly not the least. That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed." (Gildas: *De Exidio Conquestu Britanniae*)

Jebson does not examine the mention of Ambrosius Aurelianus, who led the Britons to victory at Badon Hill. Perhaps this is the great leader whose exploits became the basis of the Arthur legends. Aurelianus is certainly the most likely candidate. So perhaps we can assume that Arthur fought and won a major battle against the Saxons in or near Bath. When did this happen? We can be fairly certain that the battle occurred sometime in the late 5th century, because of archaeological evidence that shows there to have been a break in Saxon style burials around Sussex at that time, and also the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us there was a major withdrawal by AD 500. Gildas can help date the battle in his *De Exidio*:

"That was the year of my birth; as I know, one month of the forty-fourth year since then has already passed." (Gildas: *De Exidio Conquestu Britanniae*, 23-26)

If we assume that Gildas was writing in about AD 540, as this is the most popular date, that would place the battle of Badon at AD 496. This date seems to fit with the idea that the Saxons left, and both Gildas and Bede suggest that there was a major defeat of the Saxons sometime in the mid-490s. But Phillips & Keatman think that the battle was closer to 493, because apparently, Bede says the battle was fought 44 years after the coming of the Saxons in 447. Jebson argues for an even earlier date.

Thus his (Gildas) general outline of the coming of the Saxons is probably correct. That is, some Saxon mercenaries hired to defend Britain; reinforced later; followed by a rebellion around 440. Some time later the Britons fight back winning the Battle of Mount Badon in around 495. In Gildas' time, the picture was reasonably stable with Saxon incursions along the Thames, SE from the Wash and along the East coast of Britain.

"These dates are conjectural but fit reasonably well with both the archaeological evidence which places the first Saxon artefacts in the first half of the 5th century, and with the (tiny) evidence of the Gallic Chronicles. The dating is helped if Gildas was writing in say 500-510, as it moves the date of Mount Badon back to 460-470 and thus closer to the rebellion." (Jebson, 1994, [j@wg.icl.co.uk](mailto:j@wg.icl.co.uk))

But where is Badon? To solve this mystery, we turn to the spelling of the name "Badon". Often medieval scribes would use dd when writing the sound th. However, sometimes they'd drop the second d even when they meant th. If this were the case, Badon would actually be Bathon. When you consider that Badon may have been pronounced Bathon in the British tongue, one of the more likely places for Badon is the town of Bath, in Avon ( Phillips & Keatman, 86-87. ).

What other evidence do we have to suggest Bath? If the battle of Badon was fought near Bath, it would explain why it was so crucial, because if the Saxons had won, they would have

been less than 15 miles from the Bristol Channel, thereby practically cutting Britain in two. Bath is also the place that Geoffry of Monmouth says "that Arthur fought his most celebrated battle." (pg 87, Phillips & Keatman, 1993). In the *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius mentions Bath in a list of Arthur's battles. But he also mentions Badon when he tells us of a "hot lake, where the baths of Badon are, in the country of the Hwicce" (Phillips, p 87). The Hwicce were a tribe recorded in the "Tribal Hidage" in AD 661 as living around the area of Worcester and Gloucestershire, and also the part of Avon that includes Bath. The only "hot lakes" in Britain are the hot springs that the Romans used to heat the baths in the city now known as Bath.

It is possible that King Arthur never really existed, and that the later legends had no basis in history. However, if there was a real Arthur, he may well have been the one who led the Britons to victory at Mount Badon. If so, this means he lived at the end of the fifth century of the Christian era and may have fought his greatest battle in 496, exactly fifteen hundred years ago.

### **Bibliography**

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Tony Jebson [aj@wg.icl.co.uk](mailto:aj@wg.icl.co.uk)

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