

*A famous Arthur in the sixth century?
Reconsidering the origins of the Arthurian
legend*

Article

Published Version

Dark, K. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9116-8068>
(2000) A famous Arthur in the sixth century? Reconsidering
the origins of the Arthurian legend. *Reading Medieval Studies*,
XXVI. pp. 77-95. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84001/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

A Famous Arthur in the Sixth Century? Reconsidering the Origins of the Arthurian Legend

Ken Dark
University of Reading

Twenty-three years ago, in a classic paper, Professor David Dumville effectively demolished the case for a historical Arthur, as this had been set out by Professors Leslie Alcock and John Morris. In that paper, and subsequent work, Dumville introduced a new rigour into sub-Roman history that has formed a basis for much of my own writing on this period. It is not my intention to dispute any part of his methodology, nor indeed almost all his conclusions – except one.

In his 1977 paper Dumville concludes that Arthur is easily disposed of.¹ This paper is about why I disagree with that point, although I can quite happily accept that all of Dumville's other conclusions may well be true. These conclusions include, that *Historia Brittonum* (hereafter *HB*) is a work of ninth-century propaganda of no value as a source for sixth-century history, that *Annales Cambriae* (hereafter *AC*) were both retrospective and derived from Irish annalistic prior to the late sixth century (at least), and that the Alcock/Morris hypothesis is itself pseudo-historical. Like Dumville, I also abhor those even more speculative images of a 'historical' Arthur based on *HB* which still circulate from time to time.

It is my intention today to examine material dating from before 829/30 (that is prior to the *HB*) that may relate to the origins of the Arthurian legend. This date is used as a *terminus ante quem* for the legendary development of stories about Arthur here, because - again following Dumville - I accept that the Arthur of *HB* has already acquired legendary characteristics, exemplified in the wonder tales appended to the more superficially historical portion of the text. It is my contention that Arthur in *HB* is *already* a figure of legend. That is, *HB* represents the earliest extant version of the Arthurian legend rather than offering information about Arthur as a historical figure, if he ever existed as such. In fact, by 829/30 we seem already to have hints of a figure who, as Rachel Bromwich and Oliver Padel have both

suggested, may have been the subject of topographical lore - like Fionn in Ireland.²

If, by 829/30, Arthur was already a figure of legend and topographical lore, this necessitates some origin for the Arthurian legend before 829, whether in history or story-telling. What we may look for before that date is what shall term the 'prototypical Arthur' (in preference to the 'historical Arthur') who could be a figure of history or legend. This figure might have lived or been imagined at any time prior to *HB*, but probably not within living memory, given the wonder tales in the text. So, our search has to focus on the period before c.800, whether we are seeking a fictional hero, or a historical character. As with most topics before c.800, we have very few possible sources for the origins of the Arthurian legend. In this case, these have conveniently been listed by the editors and Daniel Huws in their introduction to *The Arthur of the Welsh*.³

By far the best known textual source is the famous mention of Arthur in *Y Gododdin*, a Middle Welsh heroic poem purporting to describe a raid on Catraeth (perhaps Catterick) in the late sixth or early seventh century AD. The date of composition of *Y Gododdin* is uncertain, although the original might possibly go back to the latest sixth or seventh century. The poem does seem to show knowledge of aspects of specifically seventh century material culture, such as drinking wine from glass vessels. Archaeology suggests that this was a widespread aristocratic practice in later sixth and seventh century British courts, but otherwise uncommon in the post-Roman and pre-Norman period.⁴

However, Arthur occurs only once in *Y Gododdin*, in a famous stanza recounting that warrior was heroic, but 'not Arthur'. This has been usually seen as a 'late', perhaps ninth-century or later, addition to the text. But the relevant lines have recently been assigned to the original text and dated to the later sixth-seventh century, by John Koch. As often observed, the poem, whether it is ninth-century or earlier in origin, appears to show Arthur as a popular military hero in northern Britain. But even if so it gives us no information - whatever the date of the text - of Arthur's historicity, date or locationalization. It is, therefore, much less useful as a source for a prototypical Arthur than most scholars appear to have supposed.

There are two annalistic references, both in *AC*, to battles involving Arthur. A decade or so before Dumville's paper, Thomas Jones had sensibly highlighted the atypical character of the first such

entry (under 516/8). This entry relates, in improbable detail, Arthur's triumph at the battle of Mount Badon. The battle, independently recorded by Gildas, is a real enough - probably very early sixth century - event, but as Thomas Charles Edwards has commented, the annal 'sounds like a gloss'. This is to my mind a mild but reasonable verdict, it could be entirely a retrospective addition based on the later fame of Arthur. The details, which involve Arthur carrying a religious image, recall *HB*'s account of Arthur's battles.⁵

If the annal as it exists is a gloss and not a totally retrospective addition, then what was in an earlier entry for the year, if one existed, must remain unclear. As the *AC* were, for this period, derived from Irish annals, then it would be unusual any original mentioned Badon in the first place. British events are generally extremely rare in Irish annals and, if Badon was in southern Britain as usually assumed, this is even more unlikely. All of the references in the Irish annals to British events of pre-700 date relate to North Britain, excepting a few concerning Wales. This may strengthen the case that the Badon entry is a complete invention, combining the legendary Arthur with a famous enough battle for him to have fought.⁶

As Charles Edwards has again noted, *AC* and *HB* are the only sources to assign Badon to Arthur. Neither Welsh heroic poetry nor Gildas mention him in relation to the victory, while celebrating Badon. Charles Edwards has also alerted scholars to the realization that the second Arthurian entry in *AC*, which Thomas Jones was inclined to regard more favourably, is amenable to just as critical an evaluation as the first.

Although much shorter and less obviously legendary than the annal for 516/8, the reference Arthur's death at Camlann in *AC* is the first part of an unusually bipartite annal. The second part of the annal contains another statement, referring to 'death in Britain and Ireland', and this sounds like a mention the mid-sixth century plague recorded in the Irish annals and by Continental sources from 536 onward. Plagues were a topic of annalistic interest, and the annal for 539 would be a perfectly adequate entry if it contained this alone. The juxtaposition of two entries under the same year relating to separate events suggests that one has simply been added to the other at a later date.⁷

That is, in *AC* we may well have evidence of the addition of 'Arthurian' elements, one obviously legendary, one added to a pre-existing annal. *AC* is, therefore, no evidence for a prototypical Arthur,

real or imagined - like *HB*, here Arthur may already be a legendary figure. So, it is clear that poetic and British annalistic sources provide no evidence whatsoever for a prototypical Arthur, the basis of the legend seen first in *HB*. I cannot even be as optimistic about these as has Charles Edwards in his recent assessment of this material.⁸

Nor does any of the hundreds of fifth-ninth century British inscriptions contain the name Arthur, or even anything that could be the name Arthur. In the 1980s there was a claim that such an inscription had been found at a remote medieval church in central south Wales. Having read all the published accounts of the discovery, and seen detailed photographs provided by those promoting this inscription as 'Arthur's tombstone', my academic assessment of the stone is that it is certainly a fake. For example, the inscription uses REX as a prefix, 'king Arthur', which sounds fine to an English speaker, but is not - of course - the correct word order for the Latin of these inscriptions (see for example, Catamanus's of Gwynedd's epitaph, Nash-Williams's stone no.13). The argument that this could have been 'bad grammar' is negated by the fact that this is not even the correct word-order for Middle or Old Welsh or even Old Irish, the lanaguges possibly contemporary with genuine inscriptions of this type. That is, whoever carved this stone spoke a non-Celtic and non-Latin language: it was probably English.⁹

The brief fragmentary inscription from Tintagel, referring to ARTOGNOU is not a fraud, but nor is it evidence for the prototypical Arthur. Despite the media 'circus' around the excavation of this piece of stone, names beginning with *Art-* or *Arth-* were commonplace in Britain and Ireland in the period 500-800, as inscriptions show. To find the ARTOGNOU inscription contributes much to our knowledge of secular literacy in sixth-century Dumnonia, therefore, but nothing at all to the search for a prototypical Arthur. This too must be discounted as irrelevant.¹⁰

So, as the Stanzas of the Graves tell us, there is no 'grave for Arthur' among the inscribed stones and burials known from western and northern Britain. This would be not a major problem if one wanted to argue for Arthur's historicity, as nor are tombs known for all but one of the kings mentioned in Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*.

This is almost, but fortunately not quite, all the possible evidence for a prototypical Arthur of pre-ninth century date. Rachel Bromwich and other scholars have drawn attention to one final piece of evidence for there having been anyone actually called Arthur prior to 829/30.

This is a series of personal names 'Arthur' referred to as 'namesakes' by Bromwich, on the assumption they relate to a preceding Arthur. Although these have often been considered by far the weakest evidence for anyone called Arthur having been the basis of the later legend, these names may be our strongest and most convincing evidence. That they are the only evidence of any name known to us to have been famous in the ninth century being emulated repeatedly in the sixth-seventh centuries immediately demands attention and explanation.¹¹

There are perhaps six such namesakes. Bromwich and others have noted four or five, but I would add another possible example, which has not previously been brought into the discussion. In approximate date order, the usual five are:

1. Arthur son of Pedr or 'Retheoir', king of the self-consciously Irish kingdom of Dyfed, in south west Wales. This Arthur is recorded in the main Demetian genealogy, preserved both in Wales and in the eighth-century story the Expulsion of the Deisi in Ireland. He appears to have lived and died in the later sixth century.¹²

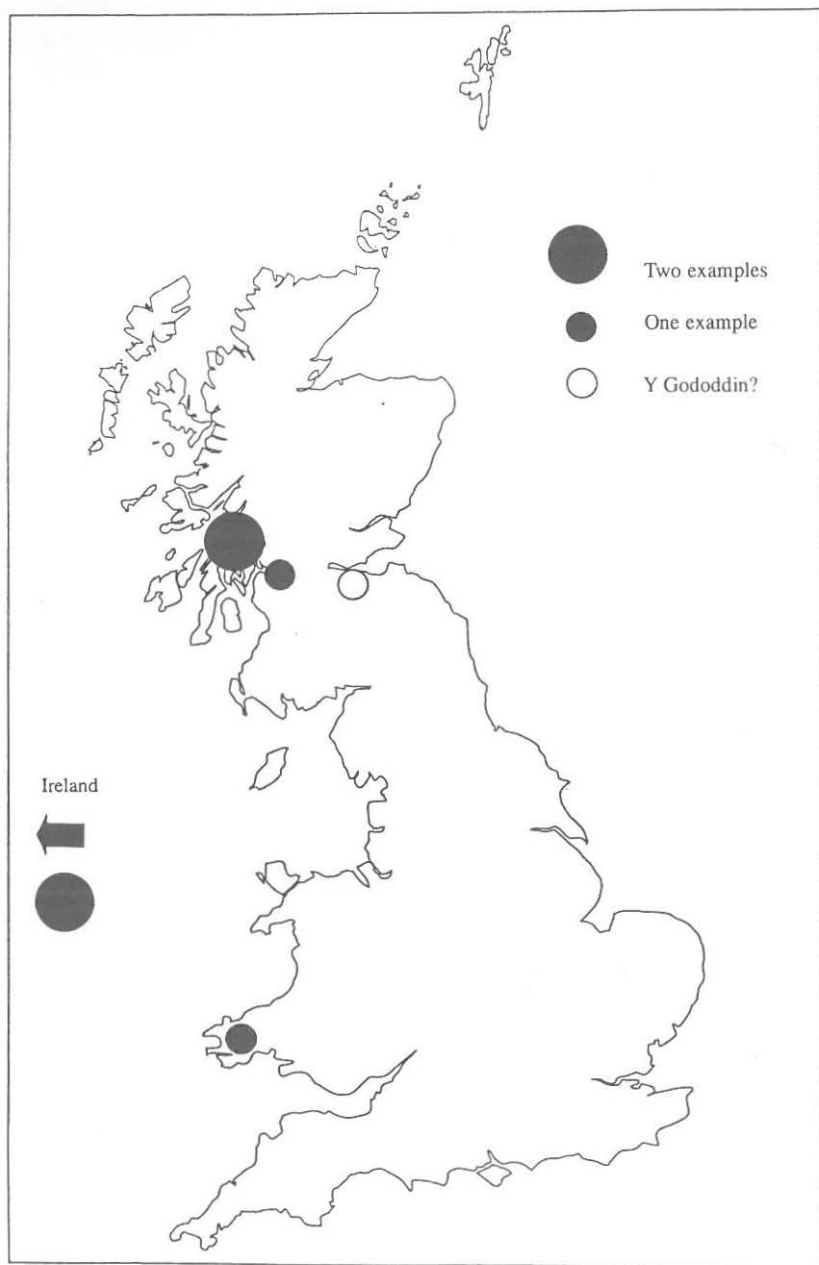
2. Arthur son of Aedan mac Gabrain was a prince of the Irish kingdom of Dalriada in Scotland, whose death is recorded by Adomnan's Life of St Columba. This Arthur seems to have lived and died in the later sixth century.

3. The next is Arthur son of Bicoir 'the Briton', who killed Mongan mac Fiachna of Ulster in Argyll in the 620s, according to shared (and probably contemporary) entries in the Irish annals. As an active warrior of the 620s, he was probably born c.600, or in the last decade of the sixth century. Bromwich suggested he might be associated with neighbouring British kingdom of Strathclyde, centred on present-day Dumbarton castle, Glasgow. However, it is possible to read this annal to say that his father was 'the Briton' not him, and Arthur son of Bicoir might also be assigned to Dalriada.

4. Artuir was the grandfather of the cleric Feradach, who signed the *Cain Adomnan* at Birr in 697, a law with dual effect in Ireland and Dalriada. If Feradach was active as a senior ecclesiastic in the late 690s, then Artuir was probably born in the first half, possibly even the first third, of the seventh century.

5. The fifth is Arthur *grandson* of Aedan of Dalriada, who is referred to in *Cain Adomnan*. Rachel Bromwich pointed out that this might well be a duplicate of Aedan's son Arthur, as the earlier Arthur is omitted from the list of Dalriadan rulers in the text. The duplication of names in a royal line is otherwise attested in this period, and this

The name 'Arthur' prior to 829



could still be a genuine pre-ninth century Arthur. If so, he would have been born during the first half of the seventh century.¹³

6. It has already been noted that British inscriptions make no mention of the name 'Arthur'. Nor do Irish inscriptions of pre-ninth century date - with one exception. This is the *Artuir* whose tombstone was found at the 'Early Christian' religious site at Kilpaecan (County Tipperary). The tombstone might be dated after c.600 and probably before c.800 on typological grounds, although details are obscure. Nothing is known of the life of the man commemorated, but here we have the tombstone of at least one 'Arthur' prior to the ninth century.¹⁴

It will be immediately clear that these men share a number of features in common. All except possibly the last were born between c.550-c.650, and the final Arthur could have been of the same period. That is six people chose Arthur as their child's name within a century of each other.

All but one is definitely Irish - if one allows Dyfed and Dalriada that the Irishness their dynasties asserted. The only possible non-Irish 'Arthur', if we take the most unhelpful reading of the annal to this pattern, killed an Irish king who was, as Rachel Bromwich noted, himself the subject of mythological story somewhat reminiscent of aspects of later Arthurian legend, by the eighth century.¹⁵

Thus, all of these 'Arthur's were Irish, perhaps apart from one who killed a renowned Irishman, in an Irish kingdom, and - if not Irish himself - probably lived in the nearest British territory to this. If this was a pottery distribution, not a series of textual references, no archaeologist would doubt that it was an 'Irish distribution', and it would be conventional to go to associate the relevant pottery especially with Ireland or the Irish. I propose to do the same in this case: these references seem to me to have a wholly 'Irish' distribution.

There are other similarities between them. All are likely to have belonged to high-status, probably royal, families. A British warrior (if that is what Arthur son of Bicoir was) noted in the Irish annals, and a senior ecclesiastic, might well also have been - in 'Early Christian' Irish terms - of royal descent (royalty in sixth-ninth century Ireland being a broad category), and this is the most probable interpretation for the rank of someone commemorated on a grave-slab in seventh-eighth century Ireland.¹⁶

Another characteristic these 'Arthur's have common is that half have, or could have, British as well as Irish associations. Dalriada and

Dyfed were Irish kingdoms in Britain, Feradach signed law applying to both Dalriada and Ireland, perhaps implying a Dalriadan connection, and Arthur son of Bicoir had a British father and fought in Dalriada. This is far more than one might find in the case of any random group of those mentioned in the Irish annals for example, and might suggest the popularity of the name 'Arthur' in Irish circles with British connections. If 'Arthur' really is a British rather than Irish name linguistically, then this too would enhance the 'Britishness' of these Irish Arthurs. Irish and British cultures co-existed in two main areas along the western periphery of fifth-seventh century Britain - Dalriada in Scotland and in Dyfed and Brycheiniog in south Wales, and perhaps also in eastern Ireland.(see map)

That is, we have group of royal, or possibly royal, Irishman (and one man who may well have been Irish and in any case killed a famous royal Irishman), half of whom may have had British as well as Irish links. Over half also of these men also had links with Dalriada, if we allow *Cain Adomnan* to count, and all born within what - even in sixth century terms - might be referred to as 'living memory' of each other. This is, to my knowledge, unique as a pattern of names (where an unusual name is concerned) in Britain and Ireland in the pre-ninth century period. In inscriptions and texts relating to the fifth-ninth century Britain and Ireland 'namesakes' are otherwise restricted to figures of Roman-period or Church history and the Bible. For example, the Dumnonian ruler Constantine mentioned in Gildas' *De Excido* was presumably named either after Constantine I or, less plausibly, after the early fifth-century British usurper Constantine III.

Several scholars have drawn attention to the first five of these Arthurs, without highlighting these shared features, although Bromwich drew attention to the links between four of them and Dalriada. But these represent a more wholly Irish distribution than simply a Dalriadan one, although this was somehow related to Wales and to Dalriada, and to royal dynasties reigning over major kingdoms.¹⁷

When discussing these 'namesakes', Bromwich and others have observed that 'Arthur' appears to be a very rare name both before and after the period c.550-c.650. This may be a far stronger argument than is often supposed. Here archaeology helps again, in the form of several hundred inscriptions dating from the Roman-period in Britain, and fifth-seventh century Class-1 inscribed stones and ogam inscriptions in Britain and Ireland. Between them, these contain thousands of names,

and for the post-Roman period in Britain, and in Ireland, these names are likely to largely derive from the upper echelons of society.¹⁸

Names we know from written sources occur in the corpus of post-Roman British and Irish corpus of these stones, although rarely for what may - even possibly - be the same individuals known to us from texts. In fact, the repetition of common names is a particular characteristic of these inscriptions, both in Britain and Ireland and there are also cases of seemingly unusual names known to us from other contexts occurring on these inscriptions. Perhaps the most striking examples are the two 'Vortigern's known from fifth-seventh century ogam stones in Ireland. There is little chance that these names represent other 'namesakes' of the type we have seen for 'Arthur'. Vortigern's reputation, as represented by Gildas's *superbus tyrannus*, would hardly prompt emulation.

Yet, whereas even 'Vortigern' is repeated twice, there is no example of 'Arthur'. The only instance before c.900 is the one stone already mentioned, which (as a slab-cross) is probably later than most of the name-repetition found on fifth-seventh century Class-1 and ogam inscriptions. 'Arthur' may well be genuine absence from fifth-seventh century inscriptions, and also from seventh-ninth century slab-crosses (Class-3 stones) in Wales. Doubtless the presence of such an inscription would have excited curiosity at most times since the ninth century - as did the mis-reading of the Slaughterbridge stone in Cornwall to contain the name 'Arthur'.¹⁹

In Roman-period epigraphy it is widely accepted that the rarity or prevalence of personal names is demonstrated - if only approximately - by rates of occurrence in an equivalent epigraphic corpus. On the normal grounds of reasoning employed there, 'Arthur' really is extremely rare - unattested apart from the examples discussed - before the ninth century. So it may well be true that 'Arthur' was truly an exceptional name in fifth-ninth century Britain, only evidenced in the group of 'Arthur's - sharing common features - already discussed. This increases the probability that this group was a discrete series, representing a genuinely unusual burst of popularity of the name Arthur for the first time. This could be because of a real hero, the historical Arthur, it could be because of a storytale hero: 'the Arthur of legend'. But what it might well demonstrate is that there was a 'famous Arthur' - of fiction or fact - in the sixth century.

Roman-period epigraphy has one other contribution to make. It is worth pointing out that there is no evidence *at all* for a pagan deity

called Arthur, or anything like Arthur, in Romano-British inscriptions whatever their date or status. The significance of this too should not be under-estimated. By the fourth century, inscriptions were being set up to some very minor cults, in addition to those deities relatively widely-venerated by fourth-century pagans. Most low-status 'Romano-Celtic' cults in Late Roman Britain were extremely localised, restricted to small areas within a single *civitas* -, or tribal-, territory. Devotions limited to a handful of rural *pagi* or upland valleys are unlikely to have given rise to a hero famed from Dalriada to Dyfed.

One cannot use Gallic epigraphy or later Irish myth to postulate a cult without supporting Romano-British evidence, given the regionality and diversity of so-called 'Romano-Celtic' paganism and the great amount of well-dated evidence for 'native' paganism in Roman Britain.

If Arthur was an Irish pagan deity, one might expect to see more trace of this in Irish literature, and find 'Arthurs' without any British connections. The only well-attested pre-829 'Arthur's in Ireland (rather than in Irish areas of Britain) both have overtly Christian affiliations: one was a cleric, the other's tombstone bears an elaborate cross and was found at a Christian monastery. That is, in Ireland too there is no reason at all to suppose that 'Arthur' was ever a pagan name. Consequently, attempts to envisage the prototypical Arthur as the residue of a 'Romano-Celtic' religion are probably misguided, whether one looks to Britain, Ireland or Gaul for supporting evidence. The origins of the Arthurian legend are very unlikely to have been in pagan religion.²⁰

These data suggest that, in the late sixth century, there was a sudden burst of interest in the previously-unknown secular name 'Arthur'. 'Arthur' briefly became for some reason famous among Irish elites in western Britain and Ireland, especially (perhaps only) those with British connections. 'Arthur' was acceptable to Christian rulers and the Church alike, and is unlikely to have been derived from pagan religion. However, this was not a saint's name - out of the hundreds of 'Celtic' dedications from Britain and Ireland there is no 'Arthur'.

The origin of the Arthurian legend might well, therefore, lie in exactly the historical period - the sixth century - in which scholars have been accustomed to seek it, rather than either later or earlier. It may also have derived from secular - rather than religious - culture.

The 'prototypical Arthur' apparently appealed to both late sixth- and early seventh-century Irish dynasts. From what we know of their

values both in Ireland and - largely through the personal names on fifth-seventh century inscriptions - in Britain, we can reasonably assume that he was famous as a military hero. Irish texts demonstrate the importance placed on military qualities in Irish kingship, and Latin and ogam inscriptions both commemorate elites with names displaying qualities such as bravery, ferocity and strength. Again, this hardly helps us in recognising the historicity of Arthur, but it might imply that another of our conventional assumptions about Arthur, that he was a warrior hero, could well have been true from the start.²¹

The Irish distribution of these names suggests the possibility that in order to find the prototypical Arthur we might search for him in Ireland, or among the Irish of western Britain. If Arthur was a specifically Irish figure, perhaps a secular warrior hero, in (or by) the later sixth century, this would explain the 'Irish' distribution of Arthur names of pre-800 date. It could explain also why we have no trace of Arthur in British sources apart those relating to the Irish dynasties in Britain before *HB*.

We have already seen that the name 'Arthur' was acceptable to Christian Irishmen of the seventh century. Although it might be a British name adopted by the Irish (one of the series beginning with *Arth-* or a sub-Roman version of Artorius), the possibility that the name Arthur (Irish *Artuir*) was itself Irish in origin is also possible. If so, the derivation would not be from *Arth-* or Artorius, as often assumed, but from the common Irish name-element *Art-*, meaning 'bear'. Given the penchant for calling aristocrats in this period after fierce (and often wild) animals, such as 'Cunoglasus' or 'Aethelwulf', then this is a plausible name for a sixth-century hero in Ireland or among the Irish in Britain.

The alternative derivation of the name from the Roman family name 'Artorius' has serious problems. 'Artorius' is not an attested Romano-British name, although it was, as is well-known, that of an early Roman officer in Britain, Artorius Castus. Artorius Castus definitely served in Britain, but most of his career was spent elsewhere and he was not a high ranking officer when stationed at York. Nor is he known to have done anything exceptional which is likely to have made him revered by Britons as a hero. His only notable act in the later 'Celtic' world was perhaps, and even this is uncertain, to command Roman forces in Armorica in 198. However, he was dead and buried by about 200, and no trace of the name 'Artorius' is found

hereafter in Britain (although there were plenty of Artorii in the Balkans and Italy) until Arthur son of Pedr/Retheoir in the 570s.²²

Consequently, despite the recent explication of his career by Linda Malcor, we may doubt whether he can be the basis of the later Arthurian legend. This would require some memory of him being preserved for almost 400 years before we have any trace of it and, as already mentioned, there is no reason why he should have been any more notable than any other middle-ranking Roman officer. But without Artorius Castus there no Artorii known from Roman Britain at all.

An Irish derivation for the name Arthur seems, therefore, credible. This makes an Irish Arthur more plausible, but there still some problems which must be addressed before we might consider relocating the 'prototypical Arthur' to Ireland. The foremost problem is the lack of a suitably famous Arthur in early Irish history or story. There is no famous Arthur in fifth-sixth century Irish history - although this could be due to the 'historical horizons' of our annalistic sources - and few Arthurs, all minor characters, in early Irish literature. Interestingly, among these literary 'Arthur's is one (Artuir 'son of Benne of the Britons', in *Acallam na Senorach*) with British associations. He is a prince mentioned in connection with the introduction of a new type of horse to Ireland. So, even in literature, Arthur may have had royal and hiberno-British, rather than exclusively Irish, associations.²³

The 'namesakes' also show a degree of spatial patterning over time that directs our attention away from Ireland as such. The first three, and one possible later Arthur, are in western Britain. These are the pre-650, or potentially pre-650, Arthurs. The two other Arthurs are located in south west Ireland. That is, prior to 600 Arthur was common in western Britain, in the seventh century known in south west Ireland. This might imply a shifting geographical focus for the name prior to 829/30 and re-focusses attention on western Britain rather than Ireland, especially on Dyfed and Dalriada.

If a Demetian Arthur is a possibility, then this might draw attention to Arthur son of Pedr/Retheoir. He is the earliest Arthur in the series, and so it cannot be inconceivable that he could be the 'prototypical Arthur', after whom the others were named. One can easily see how a sixth-century Demetian king could become famous along the Irish Sea coasts for fighting his British neighbours, but be remembered less favourably in Wales.

Distributionally, Dalriada would seem another potential location for the 'prototypical Arthur'. After all, except Arthur son of Pedr/Retheoir, the next four Arthurs all have Dalriadan links. This focusses attention on Arthur son Aedan, the earliest of these because - like Dyfed - despite having so many 'Arthur's in such a short period of time, Dalriada never claimed an earlier Arthur in its king-list.

The chance that the 'prototypical Arthur' was Arthur son of Aedan is much lower than in the case of Arthur son of Pedr/Retheoir, although he is the only other Arthur who might have been born earlier. Nevertheless, Arthur son of Aedan's death is reported by Adomnan without remark as to his fame or heroism, and his father was later perceived a 'bad' figure in later Welsh literature, as Bromwich has noted. More likely is that the Dalriadan kings were emulating an earlier, but probably 'Irish', Arthur and as we have seen, this *could* have been Arthur of Dyfed - who was safely far away to be no threat, but sufficiently 'Irish' to provide a suitable hero.

That is, the 'best' of the two earliest attested Arthurs - if one of them is the 'prototypical Arthur' - is the later sixth-century king of Dyfed, Arthur son of Pedr/Retheoir. He lived in the 'right' century to prompt the later 'namesakes', in an Irish area in Britain on the western sea-lanes and ruled sufficiently important a kingdom to be considered worthy of emulation by Dalriadan rulers.

Those wishing to relate this to *HB* might note that Gwynedd would have hardly been promoted by asserting the Demetian character of a popular hero. If Arthur became famous by fighting neighbouring Britons - even Venedotian rulers perhaps - then 'redirecting' him as a national hero who opposed the Anglo-Saxons might have been advisable given the purpose of the text. It may be irrelevant, if the whole section is fictional, but *HB* does not actually say Arthur was a Briton, only that he fought alongside their kings and the fictitious battle-list could be taken to show that no-one in 829/30 in north Wales knew what battles Arthur had actually fought.

Alternatively, of course, there may have been an even earlier - but unrecorded - Arthur, in western Britain or Ireland, perhaps in the the mid-sixth century. If so, we can say little more than the mere possibility that this might explain the visible pattern of 'namesakes'. What is clear is that the Demetian and Dalriadan dynasties did not claim any earlier Arthur and nor did any other British or Irish dynasty. If a Dalriadan or Demetian, real or imaginary, had an earlier Arthur

been so famous we might expect to see him included in the king-lists, even in a pseudo-historical fashion.

This presents us with the problem of how the fame of Arthur could have spread among the Britons as well as the Irish. The Arthur of *HB* is a British, not an Irish, hero. As both Dyfed and Dalriada probably had Irish-speaking rulers at this time, then the likelihood must be that the tales prompting the emulation of this name were transmitted partly through Irish language. But the a Briton naming a child 'Arthur' (Arthur son of Bicoir the Briton) may suggest that transmission was not wholly in Irish, but that stories about Arthur could have circulated among both British and Irish courts.

Archaeology may again help us here. Archaeological evidence may suggest how transmission of culture between Irish and British courts in Britain could occur very readily. In recent years the understanding of the character of western British kingdoms has been transformed by archaeological studies. These have made it possible to envisage the Britons as more in-keeping with contemporary Continental norms than had hitherto seemed remotely possible. This work has also shown how this culture, what one might term 'Romano-Christian' Late Antique culture, spread from what had been the core areas of Late Roman Britain west into Wales and south west Britain as well as north of Hadrian's Wall and even into Ireland.²⁴

In Britain these areas came to adopt what was in many respects 'Late Romano-British' culture, even when - as in Dyfed - their elites asserted their Irishness in ogams and language. For example, the Demetian sixth-century sites excavated to date imply that Irish round-houses were abandoned in favour of British-style rectilinear buildings by the elite and hill-fort dwelling communities used an almost entirely British rather than Irish material culture. To give an example, at my own site at Brawdy, in Dyfed, there were two phases of fifth century and later, but probably pre-seventh-century structures. The buildings in both phases are rectilinear, the material culture of the first includes 'sub-Roman' pottery and a structure which echoes aspects of Late Roman 'aisled buildings' in plan, white-washed walls, slate roofs and use of stone-arched window frames to create the impression of a 'Roman' building.²⁵

The second post-Roman phase at Brawdy comprised less obviously 'Roman' structures, but there is nothing at all Irish about any aspect of its archaeology, with the exception of a small quantity of metalworking artefacts paralleled on Irish sites of the sixth- or seventh-

century. Yet this was within a hill-fort without Romano-British occupation, one mile from a beach harbour providing a short sailing trip to eastern Ireland.

The parish church near the hill-fort was dedicated to St Bridget before the thirteenth century, and as well as three ogam stones from elsewhere in the parish, there is one possible ogam - discovered in our work - and another already known Latin inscription containing an Irish name, from the area of the medieval church. Together this suggests that, although Brawdy was at the very heart of 'Irish' Dyfed, its population - including presumably the local elite commemorated on the stones from the church - were almost totally assimilated into British culture, probably from the fifth century onward. To put it another way, there was less cultural distance between the British and Irish dynasties of western Britain than one would assume, and stories could presumably move freely between them as part of the same cultural 'world'.

The archaeological evidence for Dalriada suggests a similar affinity with British, or at least not specifically Irish, material culture. Although the dynasty asserted its Irishness, there is no trace of this in material terms. The Irish of Dalriada, as evidenced at Dunadd or Iona, became indistinguishable from their neighbours in material terms. Even the characteristic pottery of the North of Ireland, so-called 'Souterrain ware' is only present in a handful of sherds at Iona, and not at all at Dunadd. Otherwise, the archaeology of Iona could be transposed to British to the British phase of Whithorn almost indistinguishably, that of Dunadd to Buiston crannog, in British Strathclyde, except perhaps for its profusion of imported Frankish E-ware.²⁶

These observations, although based on archaeological evidence, may inform our discussion here. If we seek to explain how a hero of Irish communities in western Britain could become renowned among both British and Irish aristocracies, then the strong connections between British and Irish courtly culture may explain this. In Dyfed at least, inscriptions imply an elite speaking both Irish and Brittonic, but sharing a common culture in many other respects.

So, it seems we can construct a case for possible historical origins for the Arthurian legend, with some reliable pre-800 evidence to support and which is consistent with other data on this period. It may be that the 'protypical Arthur' was a Demetian hero. If we opt for a 'historical Arthur' from among known figures, a possibly is Arthur

son of Pedr/Retheoir - the earliest reliably attested 'Arthur', an 'Irish' king in western Britain beginning the anomalous series of royal Irish 'Arthurs' with British links. He at least existed, and ruled a major kingdom in the last quarter of the sixth century on the western sealandes with easy contacts to both the Irish and Britons. This would have been a suitable place from which Arthur's fame could have spread to Dalriada before c.600, and southern Ireland before c.650. *HB's* 'Arthurian' elements would then represent the Venedotian appropriation of his legend, when the reality of the man was forgotten. As Bromwich argued, the development of the story could partially parallel that of Mongen, who had become a figure of legend within a century.²⁷

The alternative to all of this is to opt for the view that Arthur was a figure of courtly fiction even in the sixth century. Given the lack of British literature of this period the 'fictional Arthur' hypothesis cannot be discounted, but it is weakened by two pieces of evidence. First, as Thomas Charles Edwards and others have observed, Arthur occurs in the ninth century and later in sources which only refer to figures believed to have existed. Perhaps their authors were mistaken, but perhaps this suggests that Arthur was not a figure of story alone. The second argument is that there is no evidence at all of people being named after known fictional heroes in fifth-seventh century Britain or Ireland. This may be supported once more by epigraphic evidence, and seems well-founded - although there might, of course, have been fictional heroes whose names are unknown to us and yet were afforded this honour.²⁸

A final argument for historicity might come from the anthropology of oral tradition. Anthropological studies - notably David Henige's work - suggest that the threshold of reliable oral tradition is roughly 200 years. In the period 550-650 this would imply that people might well know which figures were fact or fiction back to the mid-fourth century at latest, but in 829/30 only to about 630. If this is even an approximate guide to the transmission of information by word of mouth, those 'Christening' the 'namesakes' might have been aware whether there had been a historical Arthur or not, whereas the author of *HB* would have been only familiar with legend. As this is precisely what we appear to see, it may be possible that Arthur was known to have been a historical figure when these names were given, but had become a legendary hero by c.800.²⁹

Conclusion

The account of Arthur in *HB* can be seen as wholly fictional, representing our earliest glimpse of the Arthurian legend. But this legend may well have developed in the previous centuries from a genuinely historical figure, active either in the 'Irish' areas of Britain or in Ireland, in the sixth century. This figure, the 'Irish Arthur', as he might be termed, may have been a military hero among Irish elites with British connections in the later sixth and seventh centuries, and possibly also among the Britons. Perhaps we should look to Dyfed, even to Arthur son Pedr/Retheoir in particular, for this 'prototypical Arthur'. But we may never be able to say much more unless new evidence is found.

NOTES

- ¹ D.N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend' *History* 62 (1977), 173-92. Further points are made in: D.N. Dumville, 'The Historical Value of *Historia Brittonum*', 1-26 in R. Barber (ed) *Arthurian Literature VI*, Boydell, Woodbridge, 1986.
- ² R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', *Studia Celtica*, 10/11 (1975-6), 163-81; O.J.Padel, 'The Nature of Arthur', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, xxvii (1994), 1-31
- ³ R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, B.F. Roberts, and D. Huws, Introduction, 1-14 in R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and B.F. Roberts (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1991.
- ⁴ J. Koch (ed. and trans.), *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1997; 147-8
- ⁵ T. Jones. 'The Early Evolution of the Legend of Arthur', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 8 (1964), 3-21; T. Charles-Edwards, 'The Arthur of History', 15-32 in R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and B.F. Roberts (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1991.
- ⁶ J. Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1974.
- ⁷ See T. Charles-Edwards, 'The Arthur of History'.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ V.E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1950; no.13

¹⁰ C. Morris, 'Tintagel and the Myth of Arthur', *The Institute of Field Archaeologists Yearbook and Directory of Members* (unnumbered) The Institute of Field Archaeologists, London, 1999.

¹¹ See R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', 178-9.

¹² For the relevant passage in translation: P.C. Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1966; 4.

¹³ R. Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnan of Iona. Life of St Columba*, Penguin, London, 1991; I.9.

¹⁴ R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptiorum Insularum Celticum*, Stationary Office, Dublin (2 vols.), 1958-9; vol. 2, 924a, 100-101 and 213. That Macalister did not attach any significance to the name may strengthen the case for crediting his reading.

¹⁵ See Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', 167-8.

¹⁶ For the dating and interpretation of these slabs: P. Lionard, 'Early Irish Grave-Slabs', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 61C (1961), 95-169.

¹⁷ See Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur'.

¹⁸ See V.E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*; R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptiorum Insularum Celticum*; R.G. Collingwood and R.P. Wright (eds.), *Roman Inscriptions in Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965. Other inscriptions have been published as fascicules of the series *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani Great Britain* (1977 onward) and in an annual appendix of the journal *Britannia*.

¹⁹ R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptiorum Insularum Celticum*, nos. 97 and 297.

²⁰ K.R. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom*, University of Leicester, London, 1994; 192. The claim that the 'prototypical Arthur' was a pagan deity has most recently been forwarded by: P. Thornhill, 'The Origin of the Legend of King Arthur', *The Mankind Quarterly* XL.3 (2000), 227-285, who argues that there is no trace of an 'Arthur' cult in Roman Britain because it was one aspect of the "submerged" traditions of a rural underclass' that resurfaced in sub-Roman Britain (236). However, there is no archaeological evidence of any 'submerged traditions' in the great amount of material relating to fourth-century Romano-British paganism - the opposite seems to be the case: the fourth century is characterised by especially 'visible' low-status pagan cults. Thornhill also greatly underestimates the degree to which low-status pagans in fourth-century Roman Britain employed

simple inscriptions and cult images. These show no trace of a cult to 'Arthur', or of a 'bear god', hypothesised by Thornhill.

²¹ R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, B.F. Roberts and D. Huws, Introduction, in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, 5.

²² L.A. Malcor, 'Lucius Artorius Castus Part 1: An Officer and an Equestrian', *The Heroic Age* (1999), http://members.aol.com/heroicage1/issue_1/halac.htm

²³ A.Dooley and H.Roe (trans.), *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 8ff; J.Coe and S.Young (eds), *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend* Felinfach, Llanerch; <http://www.rochester.lib.edu/camelot/acpbibs/gowans.htm>. I am grateful to L.Gowans for this reference.

²⁴ See K.R. Dark, *Civitas to Kingdom*.

²⁵ K.R. Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, Tempus, London, 2000; chs.3 and 4.

²⁶ K.R. Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire*, ch.5.

²⁷ R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur', 167-8.

²⁸ See T. Charles-Edwards, 'The Arthur of History'.

²⁹ 'Henige's Law' is summarised approvingly by D.N. Dumville, 'Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend' *History* 62 (1977), 173-92.