

A Fanzine for Marion (Astra) Zimmer Bradley - mostly.

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Well, You asked for it.

The oldest history I have (in date of publication), a *Medullae Historiae Anglicanae*, was printed in 1687 "for Abell Swalle, at the Unicorn, at the West End of St. Pauls". It has this to say in its description of "The British Princes who contended with the Saxons to maintain their Countries rights were these chiefly:

"Arthur. A.D.516 - Arthur, the son of Pendragon, begotten upon the Lady Igren Dutcheffs of Cornwall, was Crowned King of Britain at Fifteen years of age, about A.D. 516. Twelve Battels he fought against the Saxons with great manhood and victory, the last of which was fought at Bath or Bathen Hill, where the Britains gave the Saxons a very great overthrow. But Mordred a Prince of the Picts, whose mother was Pendragon's Sister, affecting the Crown, upon the pretence of Arthur's reputed Bastardy, gave many attempts against him, and lastly at Cambalu, now Camelford in Cornwall, encountering King Arthur, gave him his death-wound, and was himself flain by Arthur in the place. From which place this renowned King was carried to Glastenbury, where he died of his wounds in A.D. 542, whose body was there buried and after 600 years was digged up by the command of Henry the Second. His bones of great bigness, and Skull, wherein was perceived Ten wounds, were found in the Trunk of a Tree, over him was a huge broad stone, on which a Leaden Crofs was fastened, and thereon this Inscription, *Hic 'acet etc.* Here lies King Arthur, buried in the Ifle of Avalon. By him lay his Queen Guenaver, whose treffes of hair finely platted, of a golden colour, seemed perfect and entire, till but being touched they mouldred into dust. These relicks were reburied in the great Church".

So much for my own private sources. I think the generally circulated story of the mystic king who collected a sword from an arm protruding from a lake ("clothed in white samite, mistic, wonderful") can be treated as enthusiastic embroidery. But at the same time I know from past investigation into the subject that there were chroniclers in the 6th century - monkish chroniclers - who wrote not always approvingly, of an Artuir, an Artfir or an Artorius living in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Sometimes they also made cryptic references to The Bear - the Celtic word for Bear was "Arth".

There is always one great difficulty, when you are researching the Dark Ages: the habit the chroniclers had of not mentioning people who achieve fame a century or so later. Gildas, for instance, who wrote in the 6th century, makes only allusions, never by name, to Arthur (though he, too, mentions The Bear). Nennius, three centuries later, has the name of Arthur as a dux bellorum who fought the Saxons in a dozen battles, leading the armies of minor kinglets. Nennius also lists one or two Marvels of Arthur which read a trifle unlikely to the skeptic eye.

A hundred years or so later, another set of clerical records puts down the story of a mighty battle at which the British were successful, and also mentions a final Armageddon which saw the death of Arhtur and Medraut (Modred?) - "and there was death in England and Ireland".

Coming forward in time to the Norman Conquest, we have Caradoc the Welshman. He writes of Arthur as a rebel king, with some disapproval in his tone. This Arthur had a wife Guenavar, was an able General, reunited Britain; but some of his actions hurt the feelings of the Churchmen. The names Cei and Bedwyr (or Kay and Bedevere) appear at this time, and it begins to appear that Arthur was a West Countryman.

And after that, of course, we have the finding of the bones in Glastonbury. There are plenty of reasons for believing that these were genuine relics, interred there at about the time that Arthur must have died, and I'll list them any time you ask. The discovery was made after Henry II had heard Welsh bardic tales of Arthur and his fate and decided (he took little on trust) to check whether there was anything of the truth in the legend: after all, it had romance behind it, mysticism all around it, and a whole wealth of corroborative detail to go on with. Besides, if he could really find this he would have something to show posterity. And lastly, he was just getting over the trouble which had befallen him when Becket was murdered - if there really was an Arthur whose bones could be found, it would be a shot in the arm for Henry. No, he was not the man to waste time faking up evidence, but he'd see no harm in taking a look.

Now let us go back to the 6th Century and avoid the official churchly chronicles. The name Arthur crops up as a reference in a Welsh bardic epic - no descriptions of the man himself. A warrior who dies fighting off the Angle invaders is described as performing great deeds on the battle field "although he was no Arthur". Here and there also, Arthur's name crops up as the leader of an army in defence of Britain against the Saxons. It seems to be taken for granted that he is known to the audience.

Another poem is written as a discussion between warriors, and "Arthur and Kei" are challenged to identify themselves and their followers. Here are "Mabob son of Modron (Uther Pendragon's man), Kyscaint, son of Banon and Gwyn Godyvriion" - also "Bedwyr son of Bridlaw".

Leaving out the references that make Arthur larger than heroic life, we can learn that he had three wives, and called each of them Gwenhwyvaer. There is also a lovely item which describes an expedition in which Arthur "and Marchell and Cei" go on a pig-stealing mission. The particular pig was in the care of a Trystan, who in turn had designs on a lady named Essylt. Trystan may have got his lady, but the unholy trio failed to get the pig, "by force, or by fraud or by theft".

But nowhere in these old sources do you find Lancelot, or Galahad, or Excalibur. Nor, I'm sorry to say, Balin or Balan (a Beli son of Manogan was known long before Arthur's time, and there was also a Bran the Blessed). There was no Sangseal, either. Nor, in the Arthurian period, a Merlin.

I mentioned earlier a monk named Gildas, who must have been almost contemporary with Arthur and who possibly lived close to Glastonbury. The fact that he does not refer directly to Arthur has often been adduced, reasonably enough, as proof that the man never existed. But this needs more careful consideration, which may show a little more light.

The work for which Gildas is known is his *De Excidio Britanniae*. It is often referred to as *The Book of Complaints*. Reading it, you wonder if the old man had ulcers or boils, or both. Being a monk, he probably wore a hair shirt, which would be just as unbearable. The preface to the *Excidio* declares that the author has one intent - to discuss the "doings of a lazy indolent people, and to avoid the exploits of successful soldiers". And this the old man lives up to. You might well look on him as among the first of the long line of the "Down with the Goddam British" types. For him, only the Romans are pure and brave and industrious, etc. etc. etc.

If you think I am exaggerating, how about this:

"There are kings in Britain: tyrants.....There are judges, too but they deal not in justice: they profit and grasp, and batten upon the upright.....(The British).....are a stiff-necked people, vident, adulterers, Anti-Christ". And later-" May God destroy them all".

Life, in fact, for Gildas, ended with Aurelius Ambrosius, the last recorded Roman to have any success against the Saxon invaders. Yet he does, grudgingly, admit that the later leaders (though degenerate, unworthy, effete, etc.) now and again threw back the invaders "by the goodness of the Lord". After this the position was fluid for many years until "the year of the siege of Mt. Badon, with almost the last defeat of the foe, and not at all the least slaughter of them". There followed, after Mt. Badon, nearly forty years of comparative peace; yet who led the victorious army there? Gildas just doesn't bother to mention it.

So here we have a hero without a name living in the same age as a named hero without a written record. A little later I shall show you the name Arthur appearing at about the same time but not in historical writings. For the moment we will look at my second chronicler, whose name is either Nemnius or Nennius. He is less restrained than Gildas, and gives a list of Arthur's most important battles. This is Nennius: "Arthur and the kings of the Britons fought against them ((the Saxons)), but Arthur was the dux bellorum"

He names twelve battles in all; some of them can be located easily enough for identification. Others are more doubtful. They seem to have taken place in quite widely spaced regions of the island, too, which suggests that Arthur must have led mounted troops. "And at the twelfth battle, at Mons Badonus, nine hundred and sixty men fell in one day under a single onslaught from Arthur's men. He alone conquered, and none other, and he was victor in all the battles".

R.W. Barber, in his book "Arthur of Albion" takes up the idea most enthusiastically. He paints a picture of Arthur and his armed men, surrounded - under siege? - in a hill-fort, and finally making a hell-for-leather cavalry charge down and round and among the Saxons, swords cutting left and right. It would be a fitting way to treat these barbaric invaders, and was the sort of thing to capture the imagination of the bards and singers, especially since it was utterly successful.

For me, Arthur lived. He may well have never worn a crown - almost certainly did not, though few men so thoroughly deserved to do so. I think we shall never know how and when he died, nor where and when he was born. He most probably died in battle, to judge by the wounds in the skull at Glastonbury, but the earliest mention of "that last dim battle in the West" appears some 200 years after his death. This was probably a flier for an Arthurian legend, and how successful it was?

The legend, however, is almost too obviously a fairy story, a rehash of most of the old epic tales of heroes dead and gone or never even born. No one can prove Arthur's birth or parentage, and even here Barber points out that Arthur ap Uther (Arthur son of Uther) could easily have begun as Arthur mab uthr (Arthur the terrible), which I find far more appealing. No one can prove his death, though we know where his body once lay. But I think the most fantastic part about the legend is that part of it which has been seen and copied by Barber from a carving over a doorway in the cathedral at Modena, in Italy. The carving is dated at around 1100 - 1120; to stop your unbelief, the figures on the carving are identified by name as Artus, Che (Kay), Winlogee (the Breton form of Guenevere), and so on.

The fantastic part about that carving is that it predates the earliest written Arthurian romance.

Miller's History of the Anglo-Saxons (19th century) makes a good point by reminding us that a few short years after Arthur must have died, the Britons (what were left of them) would have been speaking a new language and learning a new lore. Without doubt the Saxons would not have cared to chronicle the deeds of their own hero warriors. A British victory would have afforded a theme for no more than a dirge, and the name of the victor would have been only the source of painful memory. (Incidentally, Miller says that Gildas praised the valour of Arthur - he must have read a different trans-

lation from mine. Or else translated for himself).

Since Miller takes the same side as I do, I'll reprint as much of his comment as seems to be relevant.

"Arthur is the last British king in whose fortunes we strongly sympathise. We see his native land about to be wrested from him.... strangers landing and taking possession of the soil. In almost ~~xxx~~ every battle the Britons are defeated.... The forms that fall upon the pages of history are like the sunshine and shadow pursuing each other over the face of the ocean, where the gold fades into the grey and as each wave washes nearer to the shore it is ever changing its hue until it breaks upon the shore and is no more. Arthur leading the Britons, with the image of the Virgin upon his shield, seems in our eyes only like some phantom, standing upon the rim of the horizon at sunset and pointing with his sword toward the coming darkness. Then he sinks behind the rounded hill, never to appear again.

"Arthur first appears checking the flight of a British prince. His hand upon the rein, he is about to bear off the beautiful lady, but is dissuaded by his companions. He rides off moodily at the head of his followers.

"Sword in hand, we next behold him, in hot pursuit after a British chief who has slain some of his soldiers; the image of the Virgin is borne rapidly through the air.... there is a frown upon his brow. A priest approaches; others come up. They tell him there are enemies enough among the Saxons. The angry spot fades; he sits calmly on his saddle. Again he vanishes.

"His wife is then borne away, and we meet him breathing vengeance against the king of Somersetshire, vowing that Melva shall sleep shorter by the head that night. Once again there is an appeal to reason and gentleness, and he allows his war-horse to be led away as his wife is restored to him.

"....We see him ever in the van, at the battles of Glen, Douglas, Bassas, Wood of Caledon, Gunnion, the banks of the Rebroit, on the mountain of Cathregonian and in the battle at which the Saxon hordes were routed on the Badon Hills. And we no longer wonder at the slow progress made by Cerdric, or that he died before the kingdom of Wessex was established. The armed troops, led by Arthur, stood between him and his advance into Wales; they remembered the hills of Bath, and the number of the slain they had left upon those summits.

"Saving the feud with Medrawd, in which the British leader ~~xxx~~ received the wound from which he died, these few facts are about all that we can gather of the renowned deeds of the mighty Arthur"

That, oh Astra, is about all that you can rely on as being capable of verification within reason. The Glastonbury area is the popular location for his last resting place. And this can be to a certain extent substantiated, even without the bones, by the presence of two villages to the south known as The Camels. There are Queen Camel and West Camel, and they may well have been the origin of Camelot. Some say it is the neighbouring village of Cadbury, but I've no comment to make on that.

This has been one of the most fascinating pieces of research I have done as a FAPA project. I have loved every minute of it, have learned a fantastic amount of lore and legend, and have begun to study the old Saxon and Anglo-Saxon languages in order to make a few translations of my own. If we all live so long, there should be a really exhaustive treatise on Arthur in about ten years time. Until then, if you have any queries on what has gone before, please make them. It will be a pleasure to find the answers. I am only sorry that this project has held up some comments on this and that which I had hoped to have ready for Phlotz this mailing. Am I forgiven, Phyllis?

I particularly like to think of Arthur and his Guenevere resting in Glastonbury. Glastonbury sits quietly near the eastern edge of the Sedgemoor, in a district of great charm and antiquity, and boasts a thornbush reputed to have grown from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea. And Glastonbury Tor, rising sharply from the plain, is quite the most attractive part of the view from my house here on the side of the Mehdiips.

References: Gildas De Excidio Britanniae  
Nennius History of the Britons  
Medul Medulla Historiae Anglicanae  
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Various The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle  
Taliesin Ballads  
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Various Annales Cambriae  
Barber Arthur of Albion  
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