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Part I

# The Arthur of History



K1



# The End of Roman Britain and the Coming of the Saxons: An Archaeological Context for Arthur?

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The last time an archaeologist seriously engaged with the matter of Arthur was in 1971 with the publication of Leslie Alcock's book *Arthur's Britain*. Subtitled *History and Archaeology AD 367–634*, this was a rigorous academic attempt to put the historical evidence for Arthur alongside the archaeology for the period in which he might have existed. It was written in the context of the late Professor Alcock's excavations between 1966 and 1973 at Cadbury Castle, Somerset, where he had investigated the major Iron Age hill fort identified by Leland as the alleged site of Camelot (Alcock 1972). Alcock's work was a detailed account of the archaeology, framed by a critical discussion of the early historical evidence for the period and the few sparse "early" references to Arthur. Aimed at both students and an interested public, it ranged over both Anglo-Saxon and Celtic evidence throughout the British Isles.

*Arthur's Britain* offered an analysis of the supposed Arthurian evidence but was perhaps unfortunate in coinciding with an upsurge in Arthurian iconoclasm whereby most historians decided Arthur was either a myth or at best unknowable. Alcock concluded that one reference – that to Arthur in the *Annales Cambriae* ("Welsh Annals") for 537, "The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell" – was "the irreducible minimum of historical fact" and that this assured us "that Arthur was an authentic person" (Alcock 1971: 88). However, in 1977 David Dumville published a trenchant review paper in the journal *History*, which rejected the claim that any of the references to Arthur, including those in the Welsh annals, were contemporary and concluded: "This is not the stuff of which history can be made. The fact of the matter is that there is no historical evidence about Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books" (1977: 188).

This view that there is no reliable historical evidence for Arthur is one held by all serious historians of the period. Thus in 1991 Thomas Charles-Edwards' discussion of the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* concluded that: "At this stage of the enquiry,

one can only say there may well have been an historical Arthur,” but “the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him” (1991: 29). The skepticism of historians about Arthur was matched by a general rejection of the fifth- and sixth-century historical sources for Britain as a whole. Previous credibility given to Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has now been replaced by a conclusion that little historical material pre-600 can be relied upon, and Dumville’s view that a “historical horizon” of credibility begins sometime in the mid- to late sixth century for some Irish, English, and British sources seems to be widely accepted (1977: 189–92; Yorke 1993; see also chapter 2, this volume).

But if historians cannot agree on evidence for a historical Arthur, what can archaeology say? Since Dumville’s 1977 paper, no serious archaeologist has tried to combine archaeology and Arthur. There is of course an archaeology of Arthurian folklore and fakes – the numerous Arthur’s Stones (often megalithic tombs, such as Arthur’s Stone on the Gower peninsula in south Wales); other Arthurian place names in the landscape (Higham 2002: figs 16 and 18); and fakes ranging from the twelfth-century “discovery” of Arthur’s body at Glastonbury (Barber 1972: 59–65) to the more recent claims often expressed on the internet and in popular books (Higham 2002: 34–5) as well as in otherwise reputable daily newspapers (see for example the *Sunday Telegraph* newspaper of October 16, 1994). Indeed, Oliver Padel has argued that the earliest references to Arthur in the ninth century indicate that he was already a mythical figure attached to dramatic features of the landscape and that, by analogy with the Fionn cycle in Ireland, no historical Arthur ever existed (1994).

However, if we wanted to portray an archaeological context for a notional Arthur, where and when would that be? Barber has pointed to four genuine historical figures called Arthur who appear in reliable sources. These are all associated with Irish/Scottish colonies and show that the name was current in Dál Riata and Dyfed in the later sixth and seventh centuries. Barber suggests that Arthur, son of Áedán mac Gabráin, the late-sixth-century king of Dál Riata who was killed fighting the Picts in the 590s, may be the original historical figure to whom subsequent legends were attached (1972: 29–38). However, the attachment of Arthur’s name to the battle of Badon and the battle list in the *Historia Brittonum*, together with his prominence in later British/Welsh sources, has led to him being regarded as a British hero associated with the native resistance to the Germanic conquest of southern and eastern Britain which gave rise to the creation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England.

As to date, Arthur’s absence from British genealogies and reliable historical sources before the ninth or tenth centuries means that most attempts to place him historically have to push him back to the later fifth or earlier sixth century. After about 550 the historical silence about Arthur becomes more damning. In 500 British political units would probably still have ruled much of Britain from the Forth–Clyde line in Scotland south to the English Channel, though the extent of Anglo-Saxon territorial control is not historically documented at this period. Consequently the archaeological context for a notional British Arthur might be thought to be the post-Roman British kingdoms of the fifth and sixth centuries between Edinburgh in the north and Cornwall

in the southwest. This chapter, then, will look at some current debates on the fifth- and sixth-century history and archaeology of the British kingdoms.

### Gildas and the History of Britain in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

Opinions about the nature of fifth-century and early sixth-century Britain have varied since Alcock wrote in 1971. In 400 Britain was still part of the Roman Empire, which, though politically divided between a western emperor in Ravenna and an eastern emperor in Constantinople, still stretched from Hadrian's Wall in the north to an eastern frontier in modern Turkey and Syria. By 476, with the deposition of the last western emperor, successor Germanic barbarian kingdoms were increasingly coming to dominate the whole of the Western Empire (Cameron et al. 2000). The fate of the British provinces is not well documented after 400. If the late-sixth-century Byzantine historian Zosimus is to be believed, the British rebelled against Roman rule and laws, but the exigencies of the sources are such that no secure narrative of fifth-century Britain is possible.

Historians are much more wary now of using either Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (eighth century) or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to date the *Adventus Saxonum* (Sims-Williams 1983). However, in contrast to Alcock's view, it is now recognized that Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae* ("Concerning the ruin of Britain," hereafter abbreviated to *DEB*) is the only real source for much of fifth-century and early sixth-century British history. Whereas Alcock was rather scathing about Gildas, revisionist views now place him firmly as the key source from which the entire traditional account of the English conquest derives (Dumville 1977; Lapidge & Dumville 1984). The difficulty with Gildas is of course the absence of names and dates which would allow us to calibrate his narrative against continental sources. As is well known, after the death of Magnus Maximus in 388 Gildas probably names only one independently dated person – Agitius (Aetius), who was consul for the third time in 446–52. However, attempts to date the fifth-century sequence of events in *DEB* are less convincing and the contradiction between Gildas's sequence and that in Bede has led to several distinct versions of fifth-century history being posited by modern scholars (Sims-Williams 1983; Higham 1994).

Gildas is conventionally dated to the early sixth century, with *DEB* written in the mid-sixth century. Higham has tried to push him back into the fifth century (1994: 118–45) and although this has not been met with general assent, scholars such as Wood seem to allow an early date (1984: 23). Gildas describes a long series of disasters for the Britons after 388: attacks and threats of attack from Pictish and Irish raiders, the rise of kings and civil wars, the invitation of Saxon mercenaries to fight the Picts and Irish, the rebellion of the Saxon federates and the wholesale destruction that ensues. Following all this, an apparently long process of warfare ensues until a British resistance led by Ambrosius Aurelianus has some success (Sims-Williams 1983). The

battle of Badon is cited by Gildas as a major British victory, although one which leaves much of the former Roman provinces of Britain in Germanic hands. One difficulty in interpreting Gildas is that the areas where he describes, and denounces, surviving British kingdoms and the “tyrants” who rule them seem limited to the extreme south and west of Britain. This has led Higham to posit Germanic control either directly or as overlords over most of lowland England by the mid- or late fifth century (1994: 190–93).

### The Archaeology of Britain in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

The degree of survival of Roman material culture and the nature of fifth-century British material culture are still contested issues. On the basis of archaeological evidence, it is undeniable that the most obvious features of Roman archaeology – mass coinage, mass-produced pottery and other goods, villas, walled towns, masonry buildings, mosaics, hypocausts, sculpture – had ceased to be significant features of Britain in the sixth century. Our problem of course is the poverty of evidence for the continuation of Romano-British material culture after the late fourth century. Unlike some parts of the Western Empire, the evidence for the continuation of Roman technology in Britain is poor (Esmonde Cleary 1989). Opinion on the speed of change in Britain – how quickly Roman technology and lifestyle was lost, and why – has therefore been a long-term matter of debate, with two central positions emerging. On the one hand, some scholars have seen the disappearance of Roman culture from Britain as swift, catastrophic, and violent (Faulkner 2000). Gildas is one of the sources of this interpretation. On the other hand, an argument has been made for substantial continuities in material culture well into the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, ironically, perhaps, also using Gildas as evidence (Dark 1994, 2000).

This difference of opinion is of course linked to theories about the date, scale, and speed of Germanic takeover and the thorny issue of British survival in lowland England. In recent years this debate has focused on what is sometimes called the “late antiquity” paradigm. This is an influential historical view which emphasizes the cultural continuities in Europe from the third to the eighth centuries – the period of “late antiquity” – and downplays both the significance of the “fall” of the Western Empire and the warfare and displacement that may have accompanied it (Ward-Perkins 2005). Until recently, this paradigm had relatively little influence in Britain since it was difficult to see pagan Anglo-Saxon England having much late-antique flavor, while the Celtic west was visualized as comprising heroic, rather “barbarian,” societies (Alcock 1971). However, in recent years the concept of a late-antique culture of continuity has been applied to the Celtic west of Britain, in particular in the work of Ken Dark (2000: 15).

The interest in the concept of late antiquity, with its implication of continuity and relative stability, has cross-fertilized with other theoretical ideas current in British academia, in particular the rejection of invasion and migration as significant forces

for change in the historical and archaeological record. The rejection of the “invasion hypothesis,” which dominated older British archaeological interpretations, can be seen particularly in prehistoric studies from the 1960s onwards. Initially, invasions or settlements by Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, and perhaps Irish immigrants were accepted as significant, alongside a dominant pattern of endogenous change, since these could be supported by historical sources, and, at least in the Anglo-Saxon case, by substantial archaeological evidence of burials and settlements (Clark 1966). However, historical skepticism about the reliability of early sources, coupled with a desire by archaeologists to write “history-free” interpretations, led to the downgrading of even these few remaining invasions (Harke 1998). Continuity and population survival became *de rigueur* and the impression was given that violence or population displacement were not convincing explanations of cultural change and could be rejected except perhaps for small-scale elite replacement.

The hitching of the Celtic west to the “late antique” bandwagon may, however, be a step too far, especially at a time when its general applicability to the Western Empire, at least in its more extreme pacifist manifestations, is being questioned. Ward-Perkins’ recent book on *The Fall of Rome* (2005) makes a strong case for understanding how dramatic and painful the collapse of the Western Empire was for many who experienced it. Likewise Peter Heather’s *Fall of the Roman Empire* cites evidence for the destructiveness of barbarian armies and the massive decline in productivity caused by warfare (2005). The completeness of the disappearance of Roman material culture in Britain should not be underestimated. It is arguable that by 500, and probably a lot earlier, there were no towns, villas, coinage, wheel-made pottery, or other mass-produced goods. Virtually all the physical manifestations of Roman material culture had gone (Esmonde Cleary 1989; Wickham 2005: 306–12). No one built a mortared masonry structure, tiled a roof, threw a pot on a fast wheel, or fired a pottery kiln from sometime in the fifth century until the seventh century.

Views about the speed of material collapse in Britain and its explanation vary. Some Romanists see decline having set in substantially in the fourth century and the break from the Western Empire in 406–10 merely finishes off a weakened elite superstructure. Esmonde Cleary suggested that decline on Roman sites could be traced through the later fourth century and that collapse followed within a few decades in the fifth (1989). A similar pattern is traced by Faulkner, who argues that the Roman state was parasitic, and that speedy collapse was inherent in its internal social contradictions. He argues vehemently against the “late antique” paradigm and suggests that “overall the Romanised settlement pattern and associated material culture had collapsed to almost nothing by the late fourth and early fifth century” (2004: 10). In his view, “all the archaeological indicators of *Romanitas* reached zero or close to zero in the fifth century. This is true of settlements, structures and artefacts” (2002: 74); and he went on to reiterate his position that there was a “clear material culture gap separating the final collapse of Romanised settlements and assemblages in c. AD 375/425, and the emergence of distinctive Early Dark Age ones from c. AD 450/75 onwards” (2004: 10).

The alternative view regarding late antiquity was put by Dark: “Rather than being the area of the former Roman West in which Late Roman culture was most entirely swept away in the fifth century, . . . quite the opposite would seem to be true. It . . . was the only part of the West in which the descendants of Roman citizens lived under their own rule, with their own Romano-Christian culture and in recognisably late-Roman political units, into the sixth century” (Dark 2000: 230). At its most extreme, claims Dark, the argument could be made that Roman Britain’s last province did not fall until the thirteenth century when Edward I finally conquered north Wales (Dark 1994: 256).

One does not need to take Faulkner’s “Life of Brian” view of what the Romans ever did for us to accept that there is little convincing evidence of Roman culture surviving in Britain to be taken over by the Anglo-Saxons in the middle and later decades of the fifth century. Though attempts have been made to demonstrate town and villa life in the fifth century, the new Anglo-Saxon society dominating lowland England seems to be markedly different and technologically quite apart. In spite of various claims no one has yet shown Roman technology and forms continuing beyond the fifth century.

The problem of Faulkner’s view of speedy total collapse, and Dark’s alternative of a substantial late-antique survival, is how to date and interpret late fourth- and early fifth-century deposits. Faulkner’s dating of decline is dependent on coin and pottery dates. If late fourth-century coins and pottery continue in use unchanged then his theory of speedy collapse must be extended into the fifth century. Various attempts have been made in the past to show continuation of Roman material culture well into the fifth century (Frere 1987). Hines has argued that though a few Anglo-Saxon items turn up on the latest deposits of Roman sites, by and large the English set up new sites and new types of site even if some agrarian continuity is likely (1990). The apparent absence of widespread landscape change has been a key argument for the continuity theorists. While there can be no doubt that many Late Roman sites were abandoned, and some areas show evidence of much less intense agriculture and some forest regeneration, much of the landscape continued to be exploited in one way or another. Most scholars, however, would agree that there is a substantial population decline between the fourth century and the seventh or eighth century, though this apparent reduction in settlement density must be partly attributed to the loss of visibility of the material culture.

We thus have two alternative views: speedy collapse of Roman material culture in Britain, and perhaps population collapse; alternatively, many Roman sites may have continued in use with archaic Roman finds. There remains the possibility of Roman culture surviving in British territories outside the areas of early Anglo-Saxon settlement, which will be discussed below, but the problem of recognizing and identifying the British and their culture in the fifth century is a real one. For some areas we have virtually no evidence of settlement sites and buildings and for much of the fifth century the picture of the “Dark Ages” is truly dark.

## Germanic Settlement

The date of Germanic settlement, its scale, and its social and political impact are likewise contested. Some linguists have argued that the apparent massive dominance of English place names and the absence of significant linguistic borrowing from Brittonic require large-scale migration by Germanic populations (Gelling 1993). Although some Celtic names and words are recognizable in England and English names denoting British speakers exist, their numbers are still small. English appears to have totally dominated the landscape as far west as the Welsh and Cornish borders before the late pre-Norman period. Historians and archaeologists such as Higham (1992: 189–208) and Hodges (1989: 65–7) have argued that this linguistic supremacy can be explained by an “elite dominance” model and thus is compatible with minimal English settlement in Britain. However, other Anglo-Saxon specialists argue for a substantial Germanic migration without subscribing to oversimplistic arguments about language and numbers (Harke 2003), while some linguists have restated the case for large numbers and/or widespread violence with some vigor (e.g. Padel 2007).

Some aspects of this debate on the scale of Germanic immigration are due to new evidence and reconsideration of old evidence, but academic fashions and modern social trends play their role too. When Alcock wrote in 1971, a number of scholars were arguing for a significant Germanic settlement in Britain pre-400 when it was still under Roman control. The evidence for this was primarily provided by J. N. L. Myres’ suggested dating of pagan Anglo-Saxon funerary urns to the fourth century or even earlier (1986). Coupled with the evidence of belt buckles and the idea that the fourth-century term “Saxon Shore” (describing late third-century fortifications on both sides of the English Channel) might indicate an area of Saxon settlement, a theory of peaceful Germanic settlement in Britain was advanced which would then allow for gradual acculturation of the native population. The evidence for this theory was strongly challenged by Anglo-Saxon specialists in the 1980s though it took some time to penetrate through to more popular books (Hills 1979). Current opinion suggests that securely dated Anglo-Saxon graves begin in the period around 420–40, with most evidence coming after 450 (Hines 1990). A few brooches may be of earlier date, bracketed 380–420 on continental dating, but there are no secure deposition contexts before 420. The absence of stratified Germanic material occurring together with Late Roman finds tends to imply that Roman material culture had largely collapsed before significant Anglo-Saxon settlement had taken place. That is not to say that there may not have been people of Germanic origin in Britain before 400, but the current archaeological evidence suggests that, with rare exceptions, they were not signaling a separate identity any more than the numerous other groups who had been included within the empire.

So if we were to take c. 450 to 550 as the rough period in which we would wish to position Arthur, what can we say about the nature of that society? Anglo-Saxon

graves are found through much of midland and eastern Britain (Hines 2003: map 5). Although some of these cemeteries are near Roman towns there is little to suggest that the towns are still functioning. The nature of the population of Anglo-Saxon England is obviously a consideration. The likelihood that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were populated in large part by descendants of the Romano-British is still vigorously debated, though it is extremely difficult to demonstrate from evidence as opposed to *a priori* assumptions (Harke 2003; Hills 2003: 57–71). If we exclude from our remit those areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement defined by graves, we still have a substantial part of Britain that can be regarded as British in the fifth and sixth centuries. For our purposes, the distribution of “Anglo-Saxon” burial sites is probably the best guide to the nature of the population, though the gaps within the distribution may conceal surviving British populations (Dark 2000). However, the speed of Germanic takeover of the British provinces is difficult to evaluate from the sparse historical sources, and Anglo-Saxon political control may be much wider and earlier than core zones of Germanic burial (Higham 2002: 68–9, fig. 7).

## Towns

The fate of Roman towns has been central to discussions of continuity and the nature of post-Roman society. Debates about the possible continuation of Roman towns have oscillated over the past fifty years, with opinion mainly shifting between speedy abandonment, gradual decay, and continuing low-level urban activity until Anglo-Saxon takeover in the seventh century. Biddle put an influential case for continuing “central place” functions at a number of sites, with Winchester claimed as demonstrating British/English continuity (1976: 103–12). Wachter’s concept of limited non-urban occupation of former Roman towns, that is, “life in towns” rather than an economically salient “town life,” has had some support (1995: 408–21). However, subsequent analysis of the evidence has led to the general view that towns did not survive the Roman withdrawal, and the beginnings of proto-urban use in England is now generally dated to the seventh century (Palliser 2000).

A key site for the discussion of urban life in the British west is the Roman town of Wroxeter (in the modern county of Shropshire), the *civitas* capital of the British tribe of the Cornovii in the West Midlands. Since the 1960s, Wroxeter has been cited as a classic excavation demonstrating major building activity post-400 in a Roman town and indeed the continuing existence of urban life well into the sixth or even seventh century (White & Barker 1998: 118–36). Perhaps inevitably, one popular book on Arthur claims he was king of Wroxeter (Phillips & Keatman 1992: 160–161). In many ways this site is central to the late antiquity model and to arguments for the continuation of *Romanitas* in western Britain (Dark 2000). White and Barker’s claim was that significant building activity continued in the town as late as the seventh century with several phases of building after 400, including a massive

two-story structure in a Romanized style (Dark 2000: fig 26). This was not, he argued, an isolated building but part of continued use of the town generally.

The difficulty with White and Barker's proposal is that there is virtually no material culture at Wroxeter to associate with this fifth-, sixth-, and early seventh-century urbanism unless of course fourth-century artifacts were still in use in successive centuries. Most students have accepted the Wroxeter model and indeed considerable effort has been expended trying to replicate it elsewhere, with only occasional public skepticism being voiced (e.g. Gelling 1992: 23; Ward-Perkins 1996: 9–10). However, the recent publication by Fulford of an important review of the Baths Basilica excavations in Wroxeter casts doubt on the evidence of major building activity as an indication of continuous town use. Instead, he puts a serious case that the rubble spreads attributed to large post-Roman timber-framed buildings are evidence of Late Saxon stone-robbing for church building (2002: 643–5). Fulford does suggest that the evidence of less elaborate buildings may be genuine and comparable to the late structures he postulates at Silchester (in the modern county of Hampshire, near Reading). Some post-Roman activity at Wroxeter is demonstrated by the Cunorix stone, whose Latin inscription seems to indicate a high-ranking Irish figure on the site in the fifth or sixth century (Sims-Williams 2002: 25–6), and the finding of a stray bronze coin of Valentinian III (c. 430–35) has recently been confirmed (Abdy & Williams 2006: 31). However, the absence of the kind of British finds which occur at sites such as Cadbury Congresbury, in Somerset, or New Pieces, Powys, a small site only sixteen miles west of Wroxeter; and the absence of Anglo-Saxon imports, which occur on other British sites of late fifth- and sixth-century date, would seem to rule out significant activity at Wroxeter (Campbell 2000: table 1).

### The Celtic West

There are, however, some parts of the “Celtic west” where we can with confidence claim later fifth- and sixth-century activity because examples of imported Mediterranean ceramics have been identified at a number of sites. This material has been studied in increasing detail since the 1930s when it was first recognized in England and Ireland but it is only in the past few decades that its chronology has been firmly established (Campbell 1996; 2007).

Late fifth-century color-coated fine wares from the Aegean and North Africa, Phocaeen Red Slip ware and African Red Slip ware (PRS and ARS respectively, both formerly referred to as A ware), can be quite closely dated in the Mediterranean. These can be used to date the arrival in Britain of amphorae (B ware), which are in themselves less closely datable. If correctly dated, these three types of pottery seem to have reached Britain in a fairly narrow time zone from c. 475 to 525 (Campbell 2007: 26). Following this or perhaps overlapping with it, small quantities of gray color-coated pottery, *sigille paleochretienne grise* (D ware), arrived from western France, probably dating to the mid-sixth century. Subsequently we find E ware, again from western

France, not closely dated in its presumed continental source area but seemingly of late sixth- to late seventh-century date, in Britain and Ireland (Campbell 2007: 46). Substantial quantities of imported glass, again largely of western French origin, seem to occur in the same period, perhaps mid-sixth to late-seventh century (Campbell 2000; 2007). Campbell has suggested that two distinct phases of importation are recognizable, allowing us two clear chronological horizons of 475–550 and 550–650, with only a few imports of pottery or glass recognizable after the end of the seventh century (2007: 125–39).

The Mediterranean imports identify sites that were in use around AD 500. These lie most densely in a zone centered on Cornwall, west Devon, Somerset, and south Wales, with occasional outliers in north Wales, Ireland, and southern Scotland. Such imports seem to be absent from the English west and north. With some exceptions they allow us to identify enclosed and defended sites that are likely to be those belonging to the kind of British military aristocracy glimpsed in Gildas's denunciations. The key sites are still those reported by Alcock in 1971 and here I only have space to mention briefly the most important in the southern core zone.

### Tintagel

Tintagel, a dramatic cliff-girt coastal promontory sited on the north Cornish coast, has figured in Arthurian discussion since Geoffrey of Monmouth located Arthur's conception there. It has also been central to debates about the post-Roman imported pottery since the 1930s. Initially interpreted as a monastery and virtually viewed as the beachhead for desert monasticism in the Celtic west, it was convincingly reinterpreted as a defended secular site in the 1970s (Burrow 1973). It is now generally regarded as the primary royal site of the kings of Dumnonia (whose name survives in the modern Devon). Its importance and remembered symbolism may be indicated by the presence of a medieval castle of the mid-thirteenth century built on top of it as well as a possible footprint inauguration carving. Defended by a deep rock-cut ditch and bank as well as its natural defenses, it is a naturally impressive site. By far the largest quantities of Mediterranean imports in Britain have been found here in spite of quite limited excavation. There is no doubt, then, that this was an important site in the fifth and sixth centuries, but the precise nature of its function and use is the subject of continuing debate: suggestions include an *entrepot* for Mediterranean merchants, a Byzantine diplomatic outpost, a defended royal citadel, an occasional summer residence, or even a town (Dark 2000: 153–6).

Tintagel has no E ware and seems to have lost its importance by the time these western French imports reach the area, though radiocarbon dates may show some continued use. Stone foundations for more than one hundred buildings were traced on the summit area and slope terraces after a grass fire removed surface cover, but we do not know how many were in occupation at any one time (Harry & Morris 1997: fig. 2). Some of the more obvious rectangular structures are thought to be medieval and belong to the thirteenth-century castle phase. Nevertheless, recent excavations on

one of the terraces have confirmed the presence of irregular square and sub-rectangular stone footings, possibly for turf-walled structures (Harry & Morris 1997: 121–5). Very little of the site has seen modern excavation but the suggestion that it had substantial numbers of rather temporary-looking structures seems to have widespread agreement. Dark, however, envisages more substantial structures and an internal organization that he compares to a Roman “small town” (2000: 156). There is no doubt that Tintagel is an important site though the limited modern excavation inhibits secure interpretation. That it is the major royal site of the Dumnonian kings seems probable though we cannot currently identify any other high-status structures or artifacts to associate with the richness of its ceramic material.

### Cadbury Castle

Cadbury Castle (variously South Cadbury or Cadbury Camelot), dug by Leslie Alcock in the 1960s, is a major multi-walled Iron Age hill fort, occupied in the late fifth century and early sixth century. The apparent re-defense of the entire eight-hectare enclosure makes it the biggest of the definite post-Roman hill forts. The use of timber-laced stonework is comparable to sites found in north Britain though Alcock was inclined to see some Roman military experience in the apparent gateway tower.

Unfortunately the finds and structural evidence for the site are limited as the interior had been heavily plowed, removing the stratigraphy and presenting a 3,000-year palimpsest of pits, postholes, gullies, and other structural features for interpretation. From these postholes Alcock suggested a large rectangular summit hall dated by the presence of PRS, ARS, and amphorae. There is no doubt about the presence of a structure and the associated pottery concentration, but doubt must persist about the precise form of the building. Round houses also occur on the site but could be of Iron Age date. There is no way of knowing how much of the site was in use or the likely population involved. The site has no evidence of E ware and it is thought to have been abandoned in the sixth century, perhaps due to Anglo-Saxon encroachment (Alcock 1995). Although the Arthurian association of the site cannot be shown to be earlier than the fifteenth century, this was clearly an important site c. 500, though given the small scale of excavation and poor preservation little more can currently be said.

### Dinas Powys

The location of the bulk of Mediterranean finds on both sides of the “Severn Sea” suggests links across the Bristol Channel and Severn estuary between Wales, Somerset, and Dumnonia. The short distance and intervisibility of the Welsh and Somerset coasts allow the possibility of significant political linkages – the sea facilitates as well as separates pre-modern contact – and it is generally thought that Tintagel may have had primacy in the distribution of the wine and oil that the imported amphorae are thought to have contained.

As in Dumnonia, the putative high-status sites in Wales are hill forts. Dinas Powys, a small inland promontory site near Cardiff in south Wales, remains the richest and best-explored site in Wales nearly fifty years after it was excavated (Alcock 1963). Alcock's proposed chronological sequence, which envisaged the triple multi-vallation (outer defensive walling) as belonging to the Norman period, has been disputed by Campbell and Dark, and it seems clear that the whole defensive sequence should be placed in the fifth to seventh centuries (Edwards & Lane 1988: 58–61; Campbell 2007: 96–7, figs 67 and 68). This means that the initial rather weak single rampart enclosure was replaced in the sixth or seventh century by massive triple ramparts. The enclosure is quite small – roughly 0.2 hectares – but the input of labor and the seriousness of the defenses cannot be doubted. The large assemblage of pottery, glass, metalwork, metalworking debris, bonework, and stone implements gives us some idea of what might be expected on a reasonably rich site with good preservation. The evidence of fine metalworking in copper alloy, silver, and gold is particularly important. The animal-bone assemblages suggest that food was supplied from neighboring settlements. The house structural evidence is poor and Campbell rejects Alcock's hypothetical stone buildings, arguing instead for timber structures within the outlines of the drip gullies. The presence of E ware takes us into the seventh century, by which time Tintagel may have lost its trading dominance and all the Somerset sites, save Carhampton on the north coast, have been cut off from the later sixth- to seventh-century trading network.

### Western and Northern England

Few advances have been made in identifying British sites beyond the core import zone described above, though various sites have been postulated without secure artifactual sequences. The ceramic imports are strangely missing in the western English zone north from Somerset as far as the modern Scottish border, as if there were a political boundary on the Severn blocking the Mediterranean trade. Early to mid-fifth-century activity in York – described as “grandee feasting” in a declining post-imperial twilight (Roskams 1996) – or possible evidence of activity on Hadrian's Wall could both provide a context for our Arthurian search but it is only in southern Scotland that we again meet the Mediterranean dating and accompanying finds which allow secure dating of c. 500, as at the Strathclyde royal citadel of Dumbarton (Alcock & Alcock 1990).

### Conclusion

The archaeological interpretation of fifth-century Britain remains highly contentious. Only limited areas of the British west have well-dated sites and finds, as we have demonstrated at Cadbury, Tintagel, and Dinas Powys, and some areas of England have

virtually no evidence until securely dated Anglo-Saxon material appears much later. Most of the western British sites have been known since the early 1970s. New discoveries do occur, particularly of the later E ware phase of importation in Ireland and Scotland, but it is striking how few new discoveries of the earlier imports have been made. This may be partly because they are largely confined to enclosed and defended sites, which are less likely to be excavated by rescue archaeology (mandatory excavations preceding planned building development).

The distribution of the Mediterranean imports remains firmly rooted in Dumnonia and Wales and shows no sign of occurring in the Roman towns of central and western England. Whether this means these sites were genuinely abandoned, as Gildas says, or some other economic/social/ethnic explanation should be preferred remains to be seen. But the imports do allow us to identify some fifth- and sixth-century sites and assemblages.

What social context does this give us for a hypothetical British “Arthur”? Faulkner posits a period of fifth-century anarchy or revolution followed c. 500 by the rise of exploitative chieftains or self-styled kings (Gildas’s “tyrants”) in their hill forts (2004). Alternatively, Dark envisages a gradually declining *Romanitas* in a successful late-antique Romano-Christian West (2000: 227–30). Unfortunately, much of the evidence remains vague and open to very different interpretations.

We can say, then, that the archaeological picture presented by Leslie Alcock in 1971 has been modified but the account of Dumnonia/Wales/Somerset remains stubbornly close to how it is presented in *Arthur’s Britain*. No modern scholar would seek to place Camelot at Cadbury rather than in the pages of Chrétien de Troyes. Nor would anyone claim we can show that a historical figure called Arthur had any association with the fifth- and sixth-century hill fort sites of the British west. Only with the unlikely discovery of new historical sources proving that King Arthur was located in a specific place and time could archaeology tell us anything about him. Until that happens archaeologists will follow Dumville and keep him from their reconstructions – if not their chapter titles.

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